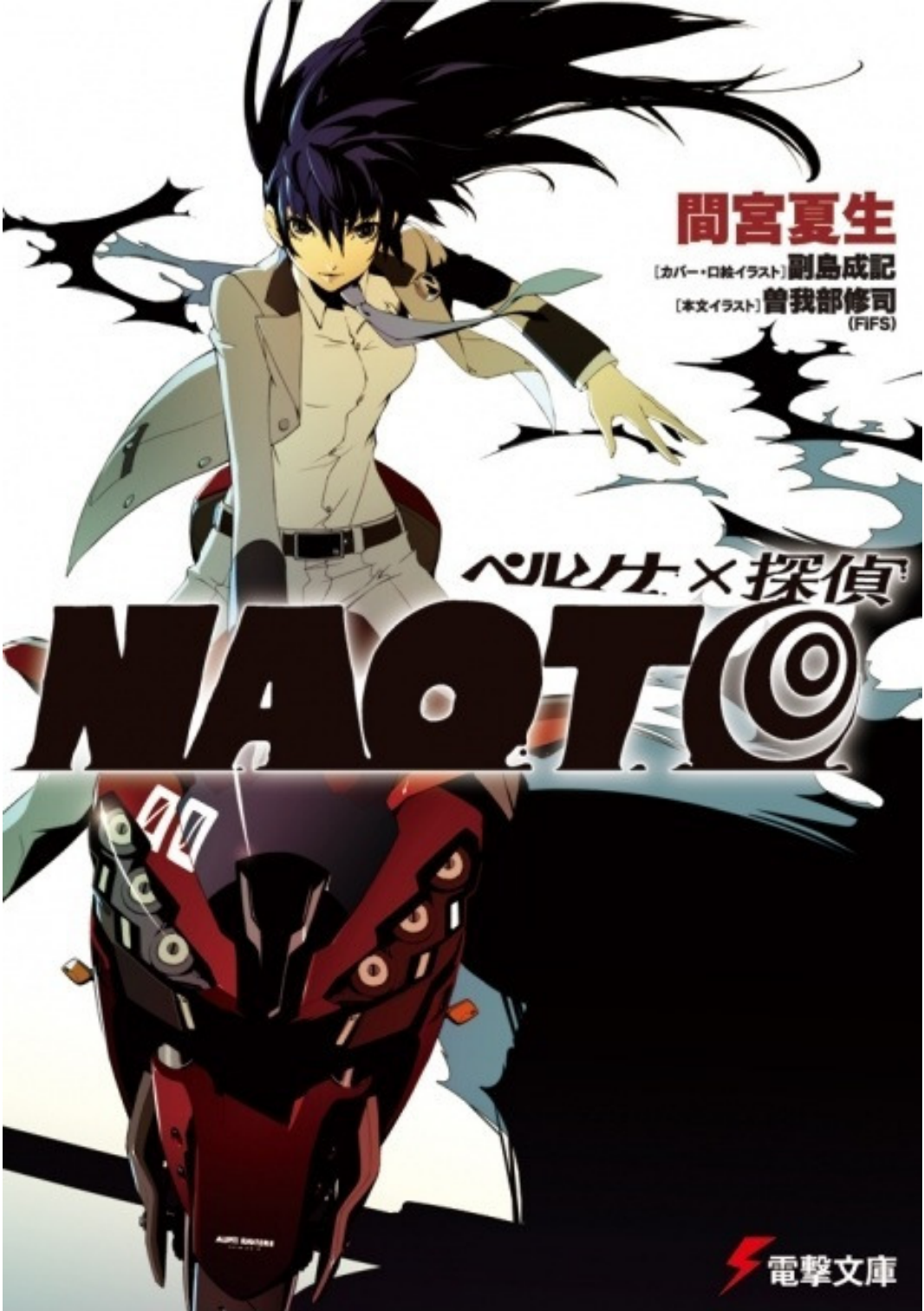
間宮夏生
[カバー・口絵イラスト]副島成記
[本文イラスト]曽我部修司
(FIFS)
ペルソナ×探偵
NAOTO
電撃文庫

Color Pages

Translation of the color spreads at the beginning of the novel. Images courtesy of herrDoktorat. Translations are from right to left.

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Tetsuma Tsuge
An excellent researcher of robots serving as the Yagokoro Police Special Forensics Division director. The type of casual person who doesn't worry about the details.

Touko Aoi
A detective employed by the Yagokoro Police. An intellectual, cool beauty like Naoto aspires to be.

Naoto Shirogane
The sharp-witted, wise fifth generation in a lineage of detectives. With her deductive ability, she has resolved many difficult cases in the past.
Nicknamed the "Detective Prince".

Sousei Kurogami
A male "mechanical weapon" developed in the past by the Kirijo Group. He has an impulsive and straightforward personality and is overly arrogant.

シャドウ
SHADOW

人間誰しもが心の奥に宿す、
普段は目を背けている
〝もう一人の自分〟。
抑圧された欲求や願望からなる
影ともいうべき存在で、
ペルソナとは表裏一体。

ペルソナ
PERSONA

心の奥に眠る〝もう一人の自分〟を
具現化させて呼び出した存在。
己のシャドウと対峙し、受け入れた者だけが、
扱う力に目覚める。
心の強さや、それを支える絆が、力の源となる。

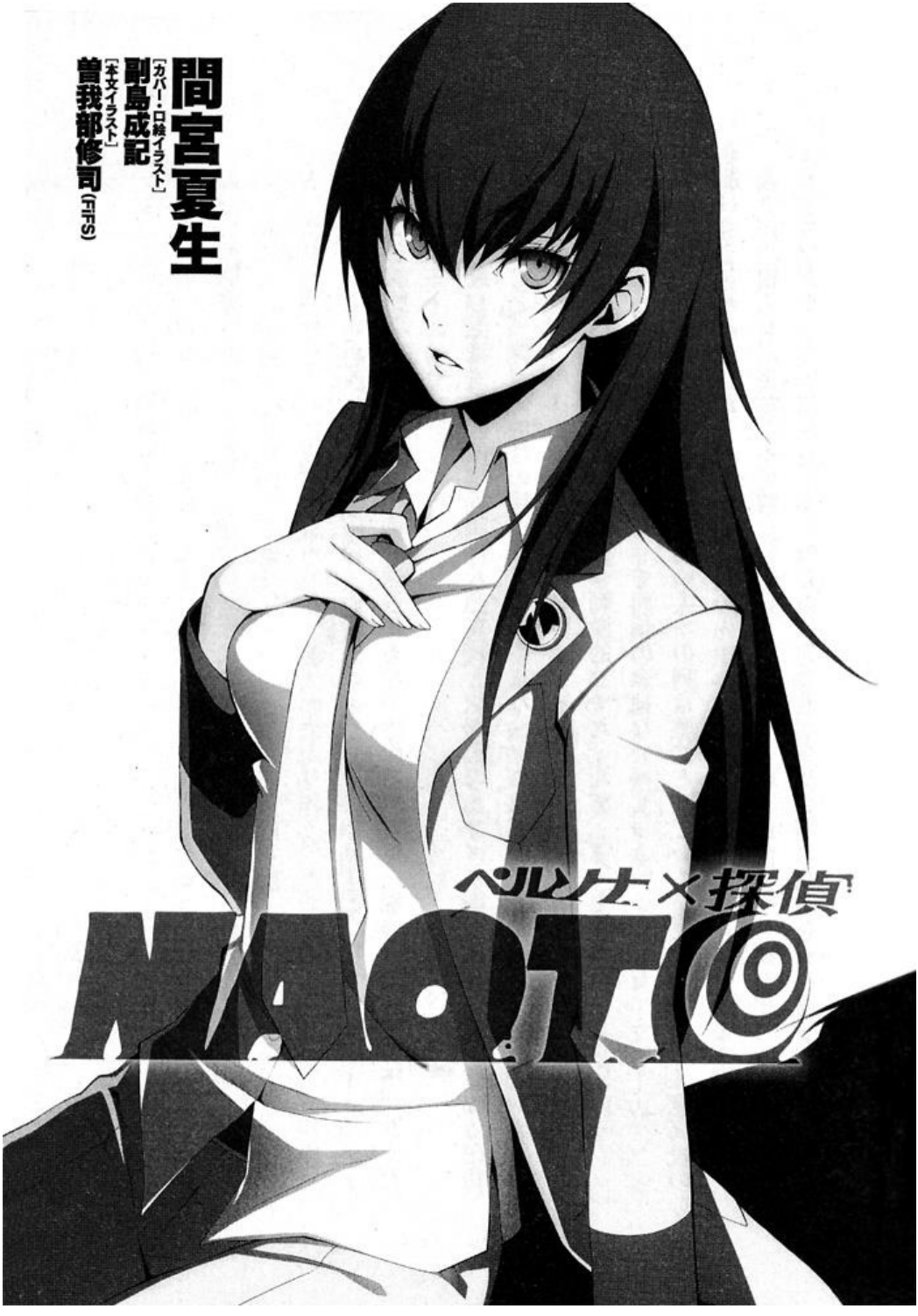
アマツミカボシ
AMATSUMIKABOSHI

直斗が得た新たなペルソナ。
「アビリティ・チェーン」
と呼ばれるスキルを持ち、
他者のペルソナ能力や効果
範囲を調律する。

Shadow
The “other self” that dwells in the hearts of every human, from which we normally avert our eyes. An existence that gets its name from the “shadow” formed from suppressed desires and wishes, the other side of the same coin as a Persona.

Persona
The “other self” sleeping in our hearts given form and called forth. Only those who have confronted their own Shadow and accepted it awaken to the power to handle them. The strength of the heart and the bonds that sustain it become the Persona’s source of power.

Amatsu Mikaboshi
The new Persona that Naoto has gained. It has a skill called “Ability Tune”, which allows it to tune other people’s Persona abilities and range.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NAOTO

Prologue: Omen

The afternoon rush hour of Yagokoro Station was just beginning when the platform was dyed crimson.

“—The limited express train to Inaba is passing through on the number 3 platform. It is dangerous, so please stand behind the white line.”

The reason for the complete congestion of the station grounds was simply that it was 5:30, the closing time of the neighboring Yagokoro High School and the offices in the surrounding area. The station caught up in rush hour was confused by the various conversations mixed together.

“—Ah, oh yeah, isn’t it today? The voting day for the Midnight Site? Are you gonna do it?”

“Of course. It’s more exciting than the usual boring variety shows, you know? So what’re you gonna vote?”

“There’s no choice but guilty. There’s no room for

sympathy, right?"

However, was it some characteristic of the Japanese? The line of people waiting for the arrival of the trains was orderly. That was why a girl with a body clothed in the uniform of Yagokoro High School was conspicuous even among the crowd as she moved unsteadily to the head of the line.

As the people kept an eye on her incomprehensible actions with the thought of "Is she cutting?", one of the girls lined up, a female student wearing the same uniform, burst out in an irritated voice to the girl who had jumped to the front row, "Hey, you! What do you think you're doing, cutting?" However, the female student's words of protest did not continue.

The moment she saw the girl's expression, her voice disappeared.

She had a face pale as a sheet and devoid of life. She wandered with her eyes unfocused and staring at empty space. It was as if not just the female

student's complaints, but even the noise of the station, did not enter the girl's ears.

Finally, with unsteady footsteps, the girl trespassed beyond the white line. Waiting expectantly in front of the girl's loafers was a steep drop like a crevasse. That was the boundary line between the platform and the track.

"H-hey! It's dangerous, so please stand behind the white line!"

A flustered station worker whose eyes had stopped on the girl raised his voice, but the urgent shout was sadly swallowed by the thunderous roar of the limited express train with a long body like a dragon passing through the platform. There was a sudden realization. The girl's figure was not on the platform.

—In the next moment, the screeching sound of the train's brakes split the scarlet sky like the scream of a dragon.

The crowd became noisy, demanding to know what had happened and the like. It was instantaneous.

The platform was completely enveloped in pandemonium. The girls screamed, the boys grumbled, the elderly chanted Buddhist prayers, the children trembled and cried and shouted. The everyday scene of the station grounds bustling in the afternoon rush hour had in one moment changed to the very picture of Hell.

The fresh crimson scattered across the track was the color of despair. Already there was no longer the figure of a girl. The girl had become a single flower. A flower of fresh blood. That flower redder than the setting sun was the merciless proof that a single young girl's life had disappeared from this world.

Chapter 1: Chance Meeting

For me, being a detective had been my aspiration ever since I was aware of my surroundings. I believed that becoming a detective in the future was my fate as Naoto Shirogane, born into the fifth generation of the Shirogane lineage of detectives.

Even if we had gained a reputation in crime scene investigation as the "Noble Shirogane," naturally the opposition to me, a young woman, was not light. However, rather than questioning my abilities in the face of such difficulties, I instead attributed it to my youth. I gained recognition by conducting myself as if I were of age, but that was my reason to live at that time.

As the result of a number of cases in which my obvious accomplishments accumulated, I became known to the world as the "Detective Prince."

Afterwards, I came to realize that my thoughts at that time were rather biased. I was so ignorant it

was frightening. As a detective, I did not lose even to the adults as far as having the necessary knowledge, but in exchange, I did not know how to enjoy myself in a way appropriate for my age, nor was I familiar with the joy of being a student.

The ones who changed me were my friends. Naturally, I was perplexed in the beginning. During my happy everyday life, I became worried that, as a detective, I would outlive my usefulness. I soon realized my fears were unfounded. I was simply afraid of the new experience. As a result, I was able to become much stronger than my previous solitary self.

When I thought of my friends, I was invincible.

That was one year ago – I had returned to the unchanging, restless days of a detective, running around from north to south, east to west, anywhere there was a case and a commission. However, no matter where I was, I did not feel that I was alone.

It could be said that I was always in contact with my

friends via phone and e-mail. It really is embarrassing, so I won't say much about it, but I was able to cheer up just by thinking that my friends were each doing their best under the same sky.

On a certain day. A message came from one of my friends. It was from Rise Kujikawa.

She frequently contacted me, but it was rare to receive such communication during the daytime. As she was a popular idol and was busy working, normally her messages would come at night.

Did she have some urgent business? While postulating such things, I picked up the phone, and Rise Kujikawa cried out in a voice that sounded like she was completely at wits' end.

"Naoto-kun! It's terrible! Please! Help me!"

As well as being in the same school year as myself, she was an extremely important person in my new life. Needless to say, I immediately canceled all my plans and came running to her side.

And what was waiting for me when I reached the place that she had specified was–

Blue skies, white clouds, and a brilliantly shining red sun. Before my eyes was the blue sea, a white sandy beach, and a girl in a bright red swimsuit with a dazzling smile. The place was a southern island. It had an eternal summer.

“That’s great, Rise-chan! You’re so cute! You have the absolute best smile! You’re just like an angel alighted on the beach!”

Even though he was standing nearby and talking endlessly, the cameraman’s voice was far away; my ears hurt with the sound of the shutter clicking without pause.

Slowly, I dropped my gaze to look at the exposed skin of my own body. The sigh that fell from my lips was as heavy as lead.

“…Ah, u-um, you’re Nao-chan, right? You’re cute, you’re really cute, but… You’re absolutely depressing, you know…? It sort of feels like you’re

the Reaper alighted on the beach…?”

The surrounding adults were smiling and telling me, “Smile! Smile!”, but, please excuse me, I really am sorry, I was not in the mood to obey. In contrast to the location and the eternal summer, my heart was as gloomy as the Sea of Japan in midwinter.

Please, I would like someone to tell me – why am I standing in a swimsuit, frozen in place, as the waves beat against me?

The season was spring. It was late March. While the people of Japan were still shivering in the cold with scarves wrapped around their necks when they walked outside, I was in the incomprehensible situation of having my natural body exposed.

By the way, the cold could not be felt. Rather, it was quite hot. The reason for this was that I was on the leisure resort on one corner of the “Artificially Made Southern Island”.

This was the state-of-the-art all-weather leisure resort called the “Yagokoro Premium Gaia”, located on the outskirts of Yagokoro. It was a place uninfluenced by the season, where, for example, one could get a taste of summer even during winter.

In short, this was all a plot. A plot by the girl who had chosen to live as an idol.

A gloomy sigh at odds with the location escaped me a second time.

It really was troublesome. This might have been the

first time I had experienced such anxiety. Even though there were so many men surrounding me, the only thing covering my body right now was a small piece of navy blue cloth. I was as flustered as could be and wrapped both my arms tightly around myself, wanting to hide my breasts, but instead achieved the opposite effect and ended up emphasizing my cleavage even more.

I was very, very embarrassed, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't lift my face; I didn't think I had the mental fortitude to face the camera and smile.

"Excuse me, Staff! It looks like we've gone a bit beyond what she can handle, so please let us have a short break!"

The girl next to me called out to the people around us in a lively voice that perfectly matched our location. The girl forcefully grabbed my wrist and energetically dragged me away, quickly advancing along the shore and heading toward the trees. As

soon as the girl reached the shade of the trees, she looked back at me, planting her hands on either side of her waist that was pinched like a glass flower vase and huffing.

“Sheesh! Naoto-kun! If you spend forever acting all embarrassed, the photoshoot won’t ever end, you know!”

I’ll introduce her. She was the mastermind of this unhappy situation, Rise Kujikawa. That’s right, she was the one who deceived me.

“Don’t be absurd. I’m different from an idol like you, Kujikawa-san!”

If it was the usual me, even when faced with someone from the same school year, I would normally continue to use polite speech, but there was no need to do so with Kujikawa-san, who I knew through and through.

“What was that ‘Naoto-kun! It’s terrible! Please! Help me!’ about! I’ll tell you now, did you know I cancelled all my other plans for you and came

running?”

This was exactly the conclusion I had come to after extensively brooding over the situation. It seemed like there had been plans for a photoshoot with a female idol from the same office, but she wasn’t able to come, so I was called upon to act as a substitute.

“But if I didn’t say that, you wouldn’t have come to this ‘gravure photoshoot’, Naoto-kun.”

She knew me through and through as well. Where speech style was concerned, the innocent Kujikawa-san was much less reserved than me.

“You look fine! A ponytail really suits you, you know! It’s because you’re cute, Naoto-kun. The active idol ‘Risette’ has given her seal of approval, so have some confidence!”

“…That’s just your opinion.”

“It’s true. I’m not lying. You’re really stylish and your bust is even bigger than mine!”

“…I-it’s not that I wished for it to become this big. I

would have preferred being about your size, Kujikawa-san."

"Hey, what's that? Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

Kujikawa-san pouted, looking at me with reproachful eyes, and brought her pursed lips close to my nose.

"Would you please stop teasing me? Kujikawa-san, I don't have as much free time now as you seem to think..."

"I'm not teasing you. I'm serious!"

As soon as she finished, Kujikawa-san let out an "Ei!" and prodded my breast with her fingertip. In my surprise, a "Hyaa!" escaped my throat in a voice that I would normally never imagine using.

"I-I'm leaving!"

"Sheesh! Don't get mad! Naoto-kun, this is for your sake, you know?"

"...For my sake? Are you trying to say that being

made to wear such a small swimsuit and publicly expose myself to so many people, a situation that I can only think of as a punishment, is for my sake?"

I quickly swept my gaze over the surroundings. Naturally, I trembled at the countless number of stares boring into me.

"No, no! You've got it all wrong! You should be happy, Naoto-kun! Everyone's watching you because you're cute! Isn't that something to be proud of?"

Kujikawa-san widened her large, round eyes and spoke with great fervor.

"It's fine, isn't it? Naoto-kun? You're called the 'Detective Prince' and normally pass as a boy, but you're definitely a girl. Girls look like girls. Girls act like girls. It's not weird at all, right?"

I meant to object and ask what she thought she was saying, but in the end, no words would leave me.

"Plus! You're a cute girl, Naoto-kun! You should

make an effort to be cute!”

While confirming the roundness on my own body, I dropped my gaze to my sand-covered toes.

I was truly beginning to feel that I was at my limit. More than one year had passed since I met Kujikawa-san, and we would at last become third-year high schoolers in the coming spring. People could not oppose time. Time would force the person called Naoto Shirogane closer to being female…

“…ah, sorry. It’s not like I’m trying to torture you, Naoto-kun. I think you’re pretty cool when you’re acting like a boy too. It’s true.”

Did she think I had fallen silent, not because I was lost in thought, but because I was depressed? Looking apologetic, Kujikawa-san continued speaking.

“…I’m an idol, so I don’t really have many friends my age, so I always thought, if I was somehow able to make friends with a girl my age like a normal girl, I wanted to go shopping on off days, eat crepes while

walking around, and talk about makeup and love… I was thinking that it would be fun if I could do that with you now, Naoto-kun… So I know it's selfish of me, but I would be really happy if you would act more like a girl…"

At some point, I had lifted my face, and:

"And also! Naoto-kun, it's not as bad as you think being a girl, okay? I'm glad I'm a girl, you know? It means I can do the idol job I love now."

I took a long look at Kujikawa-san's face as she spoke with a serious expression. Soon afterward, realizing I was watching, Kujikawa-san became flustered and hid her face.

"A-anyway! You should listen obediently to your best friend's advice!"

Kujikawa-san raised her voice even more. The nearby staff were surprised and simultaneously turned to look at us.

"I-in any case! It'll be impossible if you don't act like

a girl. You'll put the gravure idol style to shame! I won't forgive you!"

It may have been because she felt awkward, but Kujikawa-san began speaking nonsense. However, I realized that the fair-skinned Kujikawa-san's ears and the nape of her neck were being dyed red, so I said:

"W-what do you mean you won't forgive me? I – I don't understand what you mean…"

I was just as shaken as she was.

My heart was racing and my face flushed. It was hot to begin with, but because of the strange way Kujikawa-san was acting, the heat had spread even to the depths of my chest. In order to regain my composure before my heart was struck by heatstroke, I shook my head once and took a deep breath.

"…There is some truth in what you say. But doing a gravure photoshoot in a swimsuit is much too sudden. Don't you think these things should be done

in a certain order?”

So saying, I turned a carefully indifferent gaze toward her. However, as I should have expected of Rise Kujikawa, instead she said, “No, isn’t it like shock treatment?”, and grinned brightly without a hint of shyness.

“I’m leaving!”

“Geez, Naoto-kun, wait! Sorry! I’ll apologize! I’m begging you, please help me! If we search for another girl at this point, the sun will set!”

“Goodness, at last your true feelings are revealed, Kujikawa-san.”

“Nuh-uh, what I said before were my true feelings, you know?”

This sort of argument with Kujikawa-san, who had returned to her normal impudent self, was like a breath of fresh air and served to lighten my mood.

“I know very well that you’re bad with this kind of thing, Naoto-kun! But just for today, think of it as

helping out a friend, okay?"

I hesitated to say anything to Kujikawa-san before me, who met my gaze with a cheerful expression.

"...Saying it that way isn't fair."

As I was now, when I was told, "Think of it as helping out a friend, okay?", there was no way I could turn down the request.

"Don't worry! If you just copy my poses you'll do fine! It's a really easy job!"

At the close of the intense argument, I squeezed out in a small voice, "...Only for today," and unwillingly gave in.

After enduring countless hours of what felt like Hell, my current mental state was the horribly pessimistic view of "No matter what, I will never again listen to what Kujikawa-san says." But there was no guarantee that I would be able to refuse her, who was particularly skilled at convincing others.

As I sank down in the shade of the palm trees,

wetting my throat with a carbonated drink, I felt someone's presence approaching me from behind, accompanied by the sound of a coquettish chuckle.

"I almost didn't recognize you. You've become completely girlish, haven't you?"

When I looked up reflexively, in front of my eyes was a very familiar figure.

“...To-Touko-san.”

A woman was standing there in a gray suit at odds with the southern location. She was a tall-statured woman with exceptional, though not gaudy, style.

“It’s been a while.”

At once, I jerked my knees toward myself and hid my defenseless body. It really was nice seeing her, but being seen in such an immodest state by an old friend caused me to tremble even more.

As if finding my panic funny, Touko-san leaned over, a laugh leaving her throat as her shoulders shook.

Her name was Touko Aoi. She was a detective. She was a woman who I had troubled many times in the past. She was a person who I had always aspired to be like.

Whether it was an atrocious criminal, a brawny male detective colleague, the higher-ups among the prefectural police, when I saw her fearlessly arguing

with them as an equal, I felt that she could be relied upon.

“It’s been about three years since we last met at a crime scene…”

“…That much time has passed, huh. After three years I didn’t recognize you, Naoto. That boyish Naoto is now a thing of the past.”

“That’s… It may only be because me wearing a swimsuit does not match with your idea of me. I think I haven’t changed that much myself…?”

“Really? I thought the Naoto I knew three years ago didn’t have any friends who she could show her girlish side to?”

Touko-san directed her gaze at Kujikawa-san, who was performing the gravure photoshoot with lively expressions and actions.

–Friends. Hearing it again from a third party made me both happy and embarrassed, and I immediately averted my gaze from Kujikawa-san.

"...That may be so."

It was true the "solitary" me of three years ago that was eagerly hurrying one day at a time toward becoming a full-fledged detective was a very different part of me than my current self, who had my senpai, Kujikawa-san, Tatsumi-kun, and Teddie-kun, and also Nanako-chan and Dojima-san, and a lot of other important people.

"And also... Is it just my imagination, or have your breasts become quite magnificent compared to three years ago?"

"T-that is, um, please don't stare at them like that."

In my embarrassment, I panicked, grabbing the front of the robe I was wearing and pulling it closer to my chest.

"You haven't changed at all, Touko-san."

She was a tall and slender woman. However, she wore little makeup, and the only jewelry she had was an amethyst pendant that rested upon her

chest. Even that was something she had worn since the moment we met, so it really seemed like she was a person who went without unnecessary decoration.

It may have been because she was beautiful to begin with. As a whole, the person called Touko Aoi gave off an air of a “perfect beauty”, which had not changed from three years ago. In fact, the nearby photoshoot staff were guessing, “Is she an actress?”

“Do you really mean that? Even though this February I joyously celebrated the last year of my twenties?”

“That’s a foolish question.”

“Oh, I’m happy.”

Touko-san’s smile was a sign for the two of us to start laughing. It was nostalgic and gave me a very warm feeling.

“By the way. What turn of events brought you all the way out here just to meet with me?”

“What do you think of me, Naoto? This place is

within the jurisdiction of the Yagokoro police; is it so strange to think that I decided on the spur of the moment to drop by for old times' sake when I heard you were coming?"

Touko-san was really exaggerating.

"You must be joking. You wouldn't come out to the weather resort without good reason, Touko-san."

I knew that Touko-san was not fond of showy or bustling places

"–There's nothing it could be but a case, right?"

That was all that was left by process of elimination.

"...That's correct. I have an official request for Naoto Shirogane from the Yagokoro Police."

As Touko-san's lips curled into a thin smile, she brushed back a lock of her soft black hair.

"The matter is an 'investigation of a series of disappearances.' Two students of 'Yagokoro High School' within the Yagokoro area have disappeared in succession. One week after their disappearances,

there still aren't any strong leads. However, we're also pursuing another important case. So I was really hoping that you would be able to find them, Naoto. Starting in April, I want you to infiltrate Yagokoro High School as a third-year transfer student and conduct an internal investigation."

As if saying it just to be polite, Touko-san continued, "That's how it is, so I look forward to working with you." She clapped me on the shoulder once and said, "As soon as the particulars are arranged, I'll have one of my subordinates contact you," and turned on her heel.

"Please wait, Touko-san! What will you do if I refuse?"

It wasn't a lie. In my mind's eye, I saw the faces of the people important to me, and my eye was caught by the shining idol at the water's edge. In truth, following our reunion after a long time, I felt a bit of loneliness at the thought of parting with her. It would be my last year of high school. I had wished to

get away from cases for a little while and prioritize spending time with my friends.

“You can’t do that.”

The reply was immediate.

“You know how I am, right? Do you think I would allow you to refuse?”

Rather than replying, I gave her a bitter smile. I couldn’t match up to Touko-san.

“And there’s one more thing, the main reason I think you won’t refuse, Naoto–”

Turning only her head to look at me, Touko-san smiled triumphantly and said this.

“–The Naoto Shirogane I know is a ‘detective’, isn’t she?”

At that moment, my heart thudded strongly.

“If you’re seriously aiming to become an idol, I’ll give up. If it’s you, Naoto, you’ll do well even as an idol. I’ll give you my blessing, since I know your

work ethic and capability well."

Touko-san informed me smoothly and began walking again. However, Touko-san, who was bad with people, soon stopped and murmured, "That was pretty forced.

"...Ah, that's right. By the way, the case this time is pretty complex, you know. If it's handled poorly, it'll definitely leave a pretty bad taste in our mouths. What'll you do? If you're going to refuse, now's the time."

I stood up and shook my head. A smile was forming on my lips.

"...That's a foolish question."

For example, like Kujikawa-san, who had found her calling as an idol, or like Tatsumi-kun, who had decided that nothing compared to making crocheted animals.

"I will take this case."

Because I was – the detective, Naoto Shirogane.

Chapter 2: Destiny

March 31 Inside Yagokoro

After spending several busy yet peaceful days with my friends upon my return to Inaba, I told everyone, “I’ll settle the case and return as soon as I can,” parted with them for a short time with painful reluctance, and visited Yagokoro one week after the gravure photoshoot. It was the day before the start of the new school term.

Most of the necessary preparations were being taken care of by the police, and thus on that day, there was nothing in particular that I had to do. Therefore, I took the opportunity to do a preliminary investigation of the Yagokoro department that I owed much to, and at the same time took a walk around the area.

Yagokoro was a mid-sized city with a population of about 400,000 people, and as a city with many commuters, it continued to quickly develop. The

sudden expansion of the city created a peculiar phenomenon. There was an interesting gap between Yagokoro Station, with its nearby rows of modern buildings, and the suburbs with a nostalgic feel to them, so much so that it could be mistaken for having fallen into a timeslip.

Having finished my walk, I headed in the direction of the Yagokoro police station so as to give my greetings to Touko-san. The police station was a brick building with a historical feel and immediately stood out in the area around the station, so searching for it was unnecessary.

I passed down a tree-lined street that gave off the feeling of dancing sakura petals and continued into the station. I entered the glass-walled entryway and inquired of the first young policewoman I laid eyes on.

“Is Assistant Inspector Touko Aoi of the Criminal Investigation Bureau here?”

“...Um, please excuse me, but who might you be?”

She was openly questioning me. Thus, I explained, “I am the detective Naoto Shirogane.”

“Eh! You’re the Detective Prince?”

In response to the policewoman’s words, the other people in the station began to murmur as they examined me: “Huh? That Detective Prince?” “You’re kidding, right? It’s the real thing?” “…Huh, so that’s her. She’s smaller than I thought.” Suddenly, the young policewoman whispered in my ear.

“…The truth is, everyone in my family is a fan of yours, Naoto-san. Um, if it’s all right, could I get your autograph…”

The policewoman’s eyes were shining as if her initially suspicious behavior was nothing more than a lie. Immediately, someone cleared his throat loudly from behind her.

“…Hey you, if I remember correctly, aren’t you on duty right now?”

A well-built man in the prime of life was scowling at the policewoman, who said, “P-please excuse me” and quickly departed.

The man introduced himself as the assistant chief. The assistant chief nodded, his brow creased, and said, “I heard from Aoi-kun that you were coming.” I immediately inquired into Touko-san’s whereabouts, and the assistant chief answered with a troubled expression, “Aoi-kun is, uh, at her ‘lover’s’ place… She may mean an eccentric friend who she gets along well with.

“Er, Tetsuma Tsuge, the supervisor of the Special Forensics Division, is a bit eccentric… He’s one of those guys who came to the station from outside, but he’s done things like asking permission to make a laboratory in the basement, and wanting the door to the basement rooms to be on keycard access for security’s sake… Really, it’s unbelieveable.”

The assistant chief commented, though he really was grumbling. He told me that the fifth basement

floor was the office of the Special Forensics Division, at the same time as he warned me, “It’s better for you if you don’t stay too long.”

At that point, after taking a careful look at our surroundings, the assistant chief whispered in my ear:

“…Er, the truth is, my wife and daughter are fans of yours, so can you give me your autograph later?”

This time it was my turn to let out, “Haa…” and make a troubled face.

With his card key, the assistant chief opened the door on which was written “Unauthorized Entry Prohibited”, and I proceeded past. It was a brand-new, modern mechanical sliding door that did not seem congruous with such an old-fashioned building.

Because it was on the fifth basement floor, I hit the elevator button. However, though I waited for a time, the elevator did not come. When I checked the display above the door, the number shown had

stopped on “B5”. Was it out of order? I was left with no choice but to take the stairs.

I descended into the basement one floor at a time, down the gloomy staircase illuminated by the green emergency light. It was when I was approaching the fourth basement floor. Up until then, the sound of my shoes clicking against the linoleum floor had been the sole BGM, but hectic noises began to echo from the floor below like a rhapsody.

“Hurry! Cut off ‘Genesis’’s power!”

“I-it’s no good! We won’t make it in time!”

“Gah! Dammit! We’ve got no choice! You guys! Everyone hold him down!”

“S-supervisor! ‘Genesis’ is! With our power, we can no longer – w-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“…Not working. Oi! You guys! For now, focus on escaping up above!”

An angry roar mixed into the cacophony. The urgency of the situation was evident from both the

voices and their words. I flew down several flights of stairs and sped toward the fifth basement level. Along the way, I passed by a mass of people in lab coats.

"Message from the supervisor! Call someone, anyone, as long as it's not a member of the Special Riot Police!"

When I asked, "What's going on?" the people in lab coats looked at me as if I was a foreign object, and the most senior among them spoke for all of them when he answered, "It's dangerous down below! You run too!" His voice held no end of frustration. Leaving behind only those words, the man also climbed the stairs at full speed.

It was baffling. It seemed that I would not understand the situation unless I witnessed it with my own eyes. I hurried to the fifth basement floor.

I came out on a floor with a solid iron door that had been flung open. What lay sprawled out without interruption before my eyes was a bare white floor.

It had a dreary feel to it. There were also countless digital, robotic-seeming gauges that I was unfamiliar with lined up neatly on hooks in the wall.

There no doubt in my mind that this facility here was what they called the laboratory. In other words, that meant the people wearing white lab coats who I had passed by not so long ago were researchers. Why was there a laboratory in the basement of a police station…

"–Eh?"

Before I had time to think, the surprising spectacle developing before my eyes stole my words away, and I stood frozen. It was as if I was watching a scene from a sci-fi movie.

There was a person squatting on the edge of the floor. From his predominantly red and black clothes and his large physique, I deduced that he was most likely male, and from his hairstyle, around twenty years of age. What was surprising was the glint of that man's eyes. His left eye glowed with a red light

that made me think of a laser pointer.

At the man's side was the crumpled wreckage of an iron door that looked as if it had been hit and squashed flat with a huge hammer. Parts of the man's surroundings were also damaged. The walls were broken and the floor gouged.

The next moment, I thought the man's whole body wavered like steam, and he faced this way and began to dash.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. He was uncommonly fast. His movements were sleek and brought to mind a leopard or puma. From time to time, he used his agile body to jump at the wall or ceiling; he inexhaustibly ran across the length and width of the open floor.

At last, the truth about the man became clear, and I was struck speechless. His black clothes were torn and his skin peeked through. However, that skin was not that of a human. His looks and figure were humanlike, but what was visible underneath the

black clothing – could only be thought of as the substance of a machine.

Adding to my surprise, the aforementioned man was facing a certain familiar person.

Standing in the center of the room with her arms crossed in a daunting pose was Touko Aoi. There was no hint of hesitation in her expression; on the contrary, the slight upward tilt of the corners of her mouth could only be interpreted to mean that she was enjoying the situation.

"...Are you trying to say you would dare raise a hand to me, you impertinent brat?"

"Idiot! Touko! Run away now! Genesis's gone wild; you can't get through to him now! There's no way to return him to his original state except to reboot!"

The middle-aged man wearing work clothes cried out and grabbed Touko-san's shoulder. He was a man who had a much larger figure than the men in lab coats I had passed by earlier. At a glance, he seemed to be the manager, but from what he was

saying, the large man was most likely also a researcher.

“Touko-san! What in the world is this? What’s going on?”

The two of them reacted at the sound of my voice. It seemed like somehow they were the only two left on this floor.

“...Naoto, huh. I’ve been waiting for you to come.”

Keeping her eyes on the approaching man, Touko-san answered quietly.

Because I had just arrived a moment ago, I did not understand all the details, but I was able to deduce that the man named “Genesis” seemed to be running wild. The destruction of the walls and floor was most likely the work of the beastlike man. In addition, it was immediately obvious that that extremely dangerous wild man was attacking Touko-san.

“Boy! You’ve got bad timing! Leave the floor now!”

I shook my head at the large man.

“I cannot leave Touko-san and flee!”

Touko-san was an important person to me. Deserting her and escaping by myself was out of the question.

–It was at that moment. Suddenly, Genesis stopped moving and turned his head to look at me.

When I saw him from up close, he was very tall. When compared to that man, I was the size of a child. Those red eyes were focused on me. Was he sizing me up?

I swallowed hard. I immediately took several steps back. I had a bad feeling about this.

“Dammit! That’s why I told you to run!”

Had I been careless, standing out? He had changed targets. Genesis turned his body to face me and rushed at me in a straight line.

I turned nimbly on my heel. I dashed with all my strength back toward the staircase from which I had come. I thought that I might be able to successfully

escape if I made it past the iron door. However, it was a futile struggle. Escape was impossible to begin with. It was the same sort of law that said that no one who encountered a tiger in the jungle would be able to get away, no matter who they may have been.

Right away, I was caught by the nape of the neck by Genesis, shoved roughly to the floor, and brought down. The shock ran through my back and the wind was forcibly knocked out of me.

Genesis was right in front of me as I gritted my teeth against the suffocation and pain. Perhaps he was observing me, but he was looking down on me aimlessly. When I looked closely, he was a boy with an intellectual countenance. However, I could not find any sanity dwelling in either of the man's eyes, whether it was the right with its wide-open pupil, or the left which emitted a burning red light.

In the next instant, his right arm stretched out vigorously toward my neck, his long fingers

snapping around my throat like teeth. In that way, the man lifted me with no more difficulty than a child with a stuffed animal and dangled me in midair with one hand.

His fingertips dug in deeply and painfully. “Gu…” A strained noise squeezed out of my windpipe. I used both my hands to try and shake off Genesis’s arm, attempting to resist with all my might. However, in the face of his terrifying physical strength, due to the helplessness of my diminutive stature, I was powerless. My heart was filled more with frustration than with pain.

“Hey! Boy! You okay? Answer me!”

A rough voice echoed across the floor.

“To-Touko, what do we do? Do we shoot him? Aah, but if we screw up, we might hit the boy…”

In the midst of suffocation that felt as if I were drowning, I searched for Touko-san’s figure as my last hope. Why was it? The Touko-san I saw as my vision blurred seemed to be calmer than usual as

she watched. Touko-san was smiling.

“Calm down, Tsuge-san. I’ll guarantee Naoto’s future.”

Then, in response to those unbelievable words:

“Y-you’ll guarantee his future – ah! Ohhh! I see, I see! So that’s how it is! If that’s the case, you should’ve said so earlier! Don’t worry me like that!”

The large man called “Tsuge-san” said only words of exasperation as an expression of relief crossed his face.

…Please wait. Why is he relieved? Besides which, what is Touko-san talking about? I don’t understand. Is there some reason for this? Even though I won’t have a future if the current situation continues! Even though I’m about to lose consciousness right now! Even though I will surely die at this rate! I don’t want to die! I mustn’t die! There are still precious people I don’t want to be separated from!

After several more seconds, the intense desire to

live also – sank far away into the depths of the ocean, in the midst of despair so deep I could not even groan. Finally, with a "bzt" like the power to a TV being cut off, I ceased to be conscious.

–It was a mysterious world that had neither up nor down, was neither hot nor cold, bright nor dark, wide nor narrow, one that was unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

I was drifting idly in that strange space. Then, from somewhere far away, a voice addressed me. It was a voice belonging to neither a man nor a woman.

"I am a reflection of thou."

That voice did not reach my ears but resounded directly in my mind. Who in the world was it? In the first place, where was this? It simply couldn't be the afterlife, but at the very least, I could not believe that it was the same world I had existed in just a little while ago.

"Dost thou desire power?"

While I was lost in thought, the voice addressed me once again. I grimaced. I was unable to understand the intention of the other's question very well with my suddenly confused mind.

"We are brethren. Thou hast the potential to obtain power – dost thou desire power?"

So I told it my current candid feelings.

"I don't want to die yet. There are still many things I must do."

I did not know whether or not my answer was correct, but those were my true feelings. I had precious friends who it would be difficult to part from, and there were still infinitely many things I wanted to live to do.

"–Very well. In that case, I shall grant thee power."

It seemed the other had somehow understood.

"Then what kind of power dost thou desire?"

Yet another incomprehensible question. “Power” was a rather abstract concept.

Right now, if I simply had physical strength, I would be happy. That was because I was frustrated at my own helplessness. If I had more power, I would not lose even to a man larger than myself.

After nodding once, I answered.

“…Yes. I want power! The power to not lose to anyone!”

Though immediately after I answered, a small seed of discomfort sprouted within me. Why was Kujikawa-san’s face in the back of my mind? The words that she had said replayed slowly in my head.

“I’m glad I’m a girl, you know?”

Was that how it was? I had nearly repeated the same mistake again.

“…Excuse me. Please disregard what I just said.”

She had said I was her best friend. I hoped I wasn’t being too conceited, but she accepted me, Naoto

Shirogane, as I was. It was similar to how I accepted the "girl" that was Rise Kujikawa as she was. I must not deny myself. After all, that helplessness was also undeniably a part of me.

"I want power. However, I want the power to support someone."

When I thought about it, Kujikawa-san's power was also for the sake of supporting "us."

I should act as my true self, and moreover, constantly do so to the best of my ability. That was what living meant for me, Naoto Shirogane.

A moment later, the voice laughed.

"–Yeah. That answer is just like you – my other self."

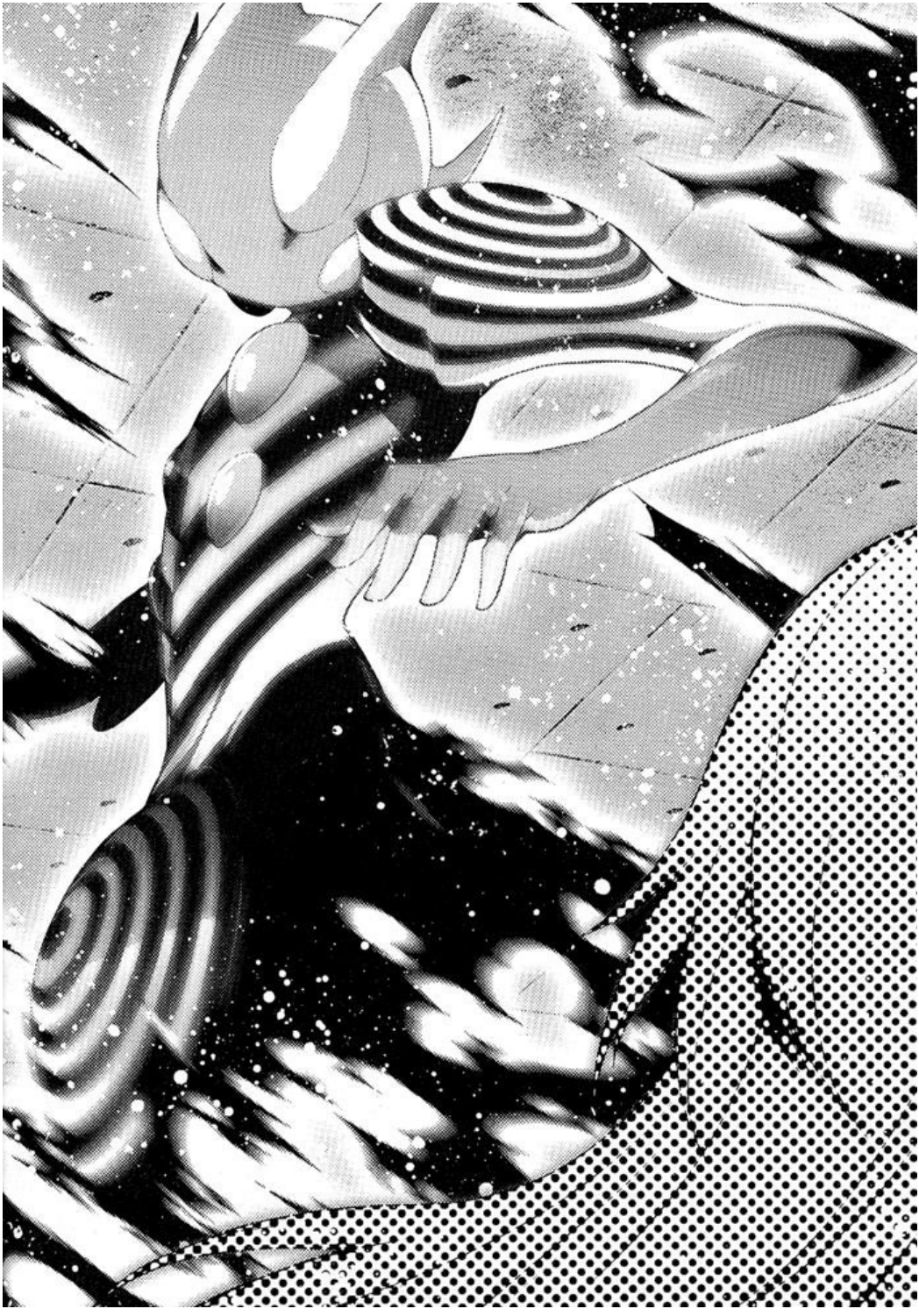
Immediately, my consciousness drifted far away. Just before I shut down, a shadow in the corner of my eye took my own form. Somehow it seemed that I had faced the same Shadow that had previously returned to me. At the same time as I entertained

that notion, my consciousness scattered like exploding fireworks.

"–To myself, the power of Amatsu Mikaboshi."

My lips moved as if possessed. The words that I myself had spoken were as a trigger and my eyelids opened.

What was in front of my eyes was the pure white ceiling belonging to the dreary floor where I had originally been. However, there was one clear difference from when I had lost consciousness before. My gaze rested calmly on the existence floating in midair.



“–This is my… new ‘Persona’.”

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The discomfort of my throat still lingered, though I was no longer suffocating. Also, the weight that I felt on my body had increased by several times since before I lost consciousness, and when I looked, the man known as Genesis had his eyes closed and was collapsed completely limp like a toy with dead batteries. Was it because his body was that of a machine? I tried to remove Genesis and stand, but I was not very heavy and was unable to move him an inch with my physical strength.

“…Even so, that surprised me.”

I muttered to myself as I stared at the white ceiling. That I would be able to summon my Persona in the real world…

Vibrations traveled to my back through the floor. Slowly I looked around. I saw people coming down

the stairs and onto the floor.

“Supervisor! Are you all right?”

The people that came into sight were brawny uniformed policemen. Behind them on the stairs were the researchers I had passed by.

My gaze returned to Touko-san, who exchanged a glance with the large researcher and said, “Tsuge-san, please deal with this ‘oversized child’.”

“Got it! You guys! Carry Genesis to the adjustment room! Scan his whole body, gather and analyze the data, and then after that fix the door that he destroyed! Ahh, about the restart, I’ll take a look at the results of the inspection, so wait for my instructions on that later!”

Like a swarm of ants carrying a sugar cube back to their anthill, the rushing people crowded around the mechanical being and as one carried it away.

When I had been freed from the heavy weight, Touko-san extended her hand to me. As she drew

me towards herself, she said, “I’ll explain the situation to you,” with an unusually serious expression.

“Yeah! In that case, come to the supervisor’s office! I’ll serve you coffee!”

The large researcher, who had moved to stand behind me without my noticing, slapped my back with his massive palm. He himself might have meant it as a light hit, but I stumbled forward involuntarily.

“As you can see, Tsuge-san is a pretty overdramatic guy, but don’t worry, he isn’t a bad person.” Seeing my expression, Touko-san smiled a little.

“Touko! Bastard! Idiot! Who the hell are you calling overdramatic?”

As he spouted profanities, the person called Tsuge was laughing heartily and without any particular ill will. I understood then that this was the “lover” of whom the assistant chief had spoken.

From the glass-walled private room of the supervisor's office that I was led to, the researchers outside could be observed moving around restlessly, but it seemed to be soundproof, so the voices and noises could not be heard at all.

"…What in the world was that uproar about?"

I immediately asked, sitting on the sofa, but Tsuge-san said, "Well, first have coffee or something and calm down," and placed cups for three people on the table.

"By the way, the coffee in stainless steel cups is the least hot."

He put only hot water in the teacup, and in the stainless steel cup and the other he poured coffee. He clearly meant to choose whichever I wanted.

I took a sip of coffee, wanting to wet my throat, and Touko-san began speaking.

"I'll introduce this old man to you properly. He's the Special Forensics Division Supervisor, Tetsuma

Tsuge.”

“Hey! I’m Tsuge! Nice to meet you!”

At Touko-san’s introduction, Tsuge-san smiled from ear to ear and held up his cup of only water.

“By the way, Tsuge-san is a dirty old man, so watch out.”

“Oi, oi! Don’t say anything that’ll ruin my reputation in front of someone I’m meeting for the first time!”

“Hm? But Tsuge-san, a long time ago, didn’t you touch me here and there all over my body?”

“Idiot! I only investigated your body a little while testing the newest machinery! That’s what I told you! If I was serious, it wouldn’t have been like that, you know?”

“...See? He’s a dirty old man to the core, right?”

Whether it was a joke or for real, I could only shrug my shoulders at their argument.

“So, this boy is Naoto Shirogane, the rumored

Detective Prince that Touko requested for an investigation?"

"That's right."

Touko-san nodded. It seemed that she had let him know about me beforehand.

"He's small for a man!"

From the other side of the glass table, Tsuge-san leaned forward and clapped both my arms. Judging by the way he touched me and the way he called me "boy", it seemed that Tsuge-san somehow thought I was male.

"By the way, who was that person earlier?"

To the question which I posed a second time, Touko-san readily answered, "A robot."

"Number R-00, codename 'Genesis' – that guy's a specialized Suppression Weapon created for the purpose of fighting Shadows."

I was surprised but I wasn't agitated. I had just confirmed his abnormal ability with my own eyes.

As for Shadows, I haven't mentioned them until now, but they were an existence with which I had firsthand experience. Furthermore, as far as Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapons went, I happened to be familiar with several. However, the ones I knew were female types.

"...Naturally, Genesis didn't cut it as a Suppression Weapon for the purpose of fighting Shadows. To be frank, he was a defective product. So the police took charge of him last year."

"Still, can't you at least count him as one of them? Among the robots developed as Suppression Weapons, Genesis has been active for the longest time, his personality is well-developed, and he knows lots of things, right?"

Tsuge-san added to that boastfully.

"So? What's the whole story behind the police taking charge of Genesis?"

It went without saying that normally one would not happen to find a robot at a police station. The only

time that would happen would be in a Hollywood movie. I had also not heard of the existence of a "Special Forensics Division". There were certainly special circumstances tied into the heart of these mysteries.

Touko-san and Tsuge-san exchanged glances with each other. "I'll leave it to you," Tsuge-san replied to Touko-san, who opened her mouth.

"You should be pretty familiar with them too, Naoto – the 'Kirijo Group'."

Touko-san's tone said she had done a "complete investigation" into my past.

"...I see, so the man from before was one of the robots developed by the Kirijo Group?"

Kirijo Group. They were an internationally prominent holdings company, a business whose electronics and AIs were particularly top-class. The multiple Suppression Weapons that I knew had also been created by the Kirijo Group. They each had deep personal connections to the Kirijo Group.

Naturally, I recalled the figure of the daughter of the president of the group, an intelligent and beautiful woman.

"That's right. Good, it looks like this won't take long. Tsuge-san was originally a researcher in the Kirijo Group's Robotic Research and Development Division."

"Nah, not 'originally.' I've only transferred to the police. Even now I'm a member of Kirijo, ya know? Don't forget, I'm only stationed here and letting you borrow state-of-the-art robots."

Saying that, Tsuge-san tilted back his cup of only water and gulped it down.

"Tsuge-san did more than a little in the development of the Suppression Weapons, and he's got plenty of knowledge about Shadows."

"Well, even so, the reason Genesis was deployed with the police this time hasn't got anything to do with Shadows. To make a long story short, to oppose last year's brutal crimes, the police and the Kirijo

Group collaborated and ended up testing the use of humanoid robots in crime scene investigation. That's when we decided to try Genesis, the failed Suppression Weapon that was smoldering away at the research facility. Then the Kirijo, who were acquainted with Genesis, chose the Yagokoro Police 'cause Touko Aoi had become a member and they had connections with her, and I became the representative for the Kirijo side."

Because of Tsuge-san, the people wearing white lab coats and the machinery on this floor were also transferred from the Kirijo Group. Tsuge-san and the other researchers' main job seemed to be the monitoring and maintenance of the robots, and from the standpoint of the police department whose basement they were renting, they were named the "Special Forensics Division", but in actuality, they were a separate division within the police department, occupying a position like a Kirijo branch office.

"But you know. If the forensics team is needed to

solve a case, I'll be worked to the bone and Touko won't apologize at all!"

"...Do you have any complaints?"

Immediately, faced with Touko-san's cool gaze, Tsuge-san said "Knock on wood!" and his large body shrank. Somehow it seemed that, like me, Tsuge-san was also unable to stand up to Touko-san.

"...Sorry for making you go through something dangerous like that." Tsuge-san's voice was unexpectedly low. "Boy, I'll say it straight, Genesis's going wild was a mistake in the experiment. In the middle of the mind interference experiment, Genesis went berserk."

Leaning back hugely on the sofa, Tsuge-san continued, "I stopped it, but he wouldn't listen to anything I said," and sent Touko-san a weak smile.

Though her lips were forming the shape of a smile, Touko-san's gaze was somehow lonely.

"...I'd like to hear the full details of his situation

sometime. By the way, will you please answer this?"

I glanced between each of their faces in turn.

"If the fact that I am alive right now is not a lie, will you explain to me how was it that I came to be saved?"

The slight, lingering feeling of something pressing hard against my neck – the things I wanted to know were countless in number, but when it came down to it, right now that was the question I could not overlook.

"When I was attacked by Genesis when he had gone berserk, I lost consciousness. At that time, I thought it was hopeless. Even so, the next time I opened my eyes, he had collapsed and I was unharmed. In addition, just before I lost consciousness, Touko-san said, 'I will guarantee Naoto's future.' What did that mean?"

At my words, the two fell silent and lent me their ears.

“And when Tsuge-san heard Touko-san’s words, he relaxed immediately. And at present I am alive, just like Touko-san said. However, what there was to be relieved about in that situation remains a mystery to me.”

I simply could not decipher the meaning behind Touko-san’s opaque actions.

“Could it be that at that time – Touko-san, didn’t you already know that I would be saved?”

I could come up with only one answer. Until I could confirm the truth with my own eyes, though it was hard to believe so suddenly, that answer was that Touko-san also possessed the same type of ability as myself.

Then Tsuge-san let out a “Huh,” as if in admiration and let his white teeth peek from behind his lips, and the corners of Touko-san’s mouth lifted up in satisfaction. Immediately afterwards, Touko-san closed her eyes lazily and pointedly, but quietly, ordered:

“Answer, Kushinada-Hime.”

In the next instant, a presence formed behind Touko-san where no person had been before. I did not need any time to comprehend the meaning of that divine existence like a celestial maiden, clad in a beautiful robe of blue-green.

“You should know about it too, Naoto. This special power – the one called ‘Persona’.”

The one who opened his mouth and continued from there was Tsuge-san.

“Personas are a rare power that can only be wielded by those who are chosen. There’re a lot of rumors among researchers, but one theory holds that Personas are the ‘other self’, an ‘embodiment of the depths of the psyche’ of the user. The condition to summon a Persona is to hit your utmost limit, which unleashes your latent power. For example, like you just now, boy, when you were caught in a ‘critical moment between life and death’.”

“The ability of my Persona, Kushinada-Hime, is the

so-called ‘Prediction’ – that I can ‘see ten minutes into the future’… So I have ‘the power to see the future’.”

“…I see, it’s precognition. It really did surprise me. That Touko-san would be a Persona-user…”

Kushinada-Hime’s two extended hands had a design like that of night vision goggles, and those two hands covered Touko-san’s eyes from behind. Most likely, those hands acted as a head-mounted display and let Touko-san see an image ‘ten minutes into the future’.

Touko-san laughed a bit. At the same time, Kushinada-Hime’s figure disappeared as if it were an illusion.

“Just like you’ve deduced, Naoto, I saw the future where ‘the three of us were in the director’s office drinking coffee’. So I was able to guarantee that you would be safe.”

Touko-san drummed the fingers of one hand against the side of the stainless steel coffee cup.

“If you think about it the other way, we’re able to sit and drink coffee together in this time because you’re alive, Naoto. In addition, you were on the Special Forensics Division floor at this time and you came to the station without an appointment.”

I was so surprised I couldn’t speak. I thought back to when I rushed down to this floor. It’s true that from Touko-san’s viewpoint, she must have known I was coming.

“As Tsuge-san says, my Persona seems fall into the ‘non-combative’ category.”

“Other than Touko, among the non-combative Persona users that the Kirijo know of, there’s also a person with ‘High Analyze’, the ability to see the Shadows’ weaknesses.”

It was possible that Kujikawa-san’s power was also similar to what Tsuge-san spoke of.

“I think it’s not a bad power for a detective like me to have. It’s been extremely helpful when I’ve used it at crime scenes.”

My new power was also a 'non-combative' type like Touko-san's, but I felt it was not unsuited to me. It may have been because a Persona was the user's 'embodiment of the depths of the psyche'.

"Up till now, Touko's prediction's never been wrong. I relaxed so fast 'cause she has such a great track record."

Seeing Tsuge-san boast of her as if it was his own doing, I agreed again, "I see."

"Just that... The reason that Genesis stopped moving all of a sudden is a mystery to us too."

"Right. Right when the boy lost consciousness, Genesis chose exactly that moment to stop moving. It's the first time I've seen something like this. I'm getting those guys to look into the reason, but the way I see it, it's not a technical issue."

"If we think about it that way, Genesis may have suspended movement by his own will, or possibly, Naoto exerted some influence on him... For example, with the power of Naoto's Persona?"

Touko-san's narrowed eyes seized me. Without thinking, I tilted my head.

"Hm? You don't remember? Your Persona manifested at the same time as you woke up, right?"

"...Yes, of course I remember."

I thought back to the mysterious experience I had had while unconscious. That may have been the mental landscape I saw when I reached the critical point, thinking "I might die."

"This is really just a theory, but something like a 'resonance reaction' between fellow Persona users might've happened in that moment. Looks like one Persona user might've pulled out the potential in the other, kind of like an attractive trait..."

"You mean to say... Genesis is also a Persona user?"

Immediately, Tsuge-san nodded. "Yeah, that's right." It seemed that Genesis really was of the same type as the Suppression Weapons I had met in the past.

“Thinking about it now, Genesis’s unexplainable actions might not have been that he was attacking you, boy, but that he was showing interest in you as another Persona-user. At that time, Genesis was so far out of control that he’d destroyed a solid iron door. If that bastard was serious, the boy would be headed to the hospital right now.”

I remembered how Genesis had sized me up at that time.

“But in the end, it looks like he lost hold of reason and wasn’t able to control his power, and when the boy was dying, it turned out like this! I’m really glad you lived!”

“...Please don’t laugh as you say that. I really was about to die, you know?”

“It all worked out! I’m saying, don’t worry about the details!”

While saying that, Tsuge-san heavily clapped my shoulder with his huge hand. It hurt. I sent a glance at Touko-san, hoping she would come to my rescue.

"...A resonance reaction, huh. It may not be coincidence that I thought of submitting the request for this case to Naoto."

Saying that, Touko-san twirled the pendant at her chest with her fingertip while showing something of a deprecating smile.

When I thought about it, I had been attracted to the person named Aoi Touko from the time of our first meeting. Thinking that, naturally I had a flashback to the faces of my friends and the battles we overcame together.

"I'd like to ask because you two know so much about Personas and my past. Why is it that the Persona I summoned this time differs from the Persona I had before?"

Amatsu Mikaboshi. The sound that I had made at that time was two words, a name that I had spoken for the first time. I was deeply interested in whether the Persona this time was of the type that could be continuously manifested.

"...Right, if I had to give a reason, I'd think it's because you've matured emotionally."

"Matured...?"

"Yup, isn't it that you've become an adult, boy? A Persona is said to be the 'embodiment of the depths of the psyche' of the one who summons it. It's not strange for the Persona's appearance and abilities to transform when there's a change in the user's heart, or to put it another way, when they mature."

"...I see."

I could not declare that emotional maturation was too vague a concept. At the very least, it was true that there had been a change in my physical maturity and circumstances as compared to before, and without a doubt, the way I thought about myself, who now had companions, had changed accordingly.

"Nah, well, don't forget that it's just my theory in the end, okay? This is about the limits of technical research because Persona users themselves are

rare. How 'bout it? If you want to know more, I'll cooperate with you. Even a tough place like this has the right machinery. If it's an easy scan like brain waves, we can do it right now if you want?"

Though Tsuge-san's eyes were glittering fiercely like those of a boy, I was filled with apprehension and looked to Touko-san next to him, who said:

"Naoto, this guy is a perverted old man. Take care he doesn't strip you naked, okay?"

She was giving me a malicious smile.

"I refuse!"

I would have to excuse myself from becoming a guinea pig. Even so, Tsuge-san was not showing any mercy. His loglike arm attacked me, trying to remove my clothes.

"Men don't grumble about one or two naked bodies!"

As I resisted Tsuge-san, whose body was more suited to a martial artist than a researcher, I was forced to think that it was only a matter of time

before he tore off my coat because I simply could not match his physical strength.

“P-please wait! Tsuge-san! Isn’t Touko-san a Persona user too?”

At the words I cried out in desperation, Tsuge-san stopped moving completely. “…Touko?

“Idiot! Instead of a man, obviously I’d rather do something with Touko, a mature woman with a voluptuous body!”

“…Ohhh, so that’s the kind of disgusting image Tsuge-san normally thinks of when he looks at me.”

Touko-san was smiling. However, her eyes were scrutinizing him, sharp as the tip of a needle. The temperature of the room felt as if it suddenly dropped by several degrees.

“W-what! I’m just kidding, you know, kidding! There’s no way I’d think anything like that! Even if I thought that in the depths of my heart, there’s no way I would say it!”

Tsuge-san lifted his voice, laughing dryly with a stiff smile, and with a jerky movement like a rusty hinge, turned around to face me.

“She’s giving me a scary look because you said too much, boy! I value my own life, you know!”

After giving a small shudder, Tsuge-san once again tried to remove my clothing. I lost my composure completely. Tsuge-san was getting far too carried away, but even Touko-san appeared to be enjoying watching me struggle.

“Boy! Just accept it! Sacrifices are an important part of research!”

“To-Touko-san!”

I glared at her with tears in my eyes, and Touko-san finally moved herself from the sofa.

“Yes, yes. Ehh, at 1513 hours, I have secured the perverted old man.”

It happened lightning-fast. “Owowowowowow!” Without any unnecessary movements, the slender

Touko-san put the large man Tsuge-san in a wrist lock and pinned him to the floor with extreme ease.

“I’m always relying on you, Tsuge-san, so I went really easy on you, you know?”

“H-he’s so happy, he could cry! So I’d be really happy if you’d let go of my arm that hurts so much, I could cry!”

Then Touko-san suddenly let go of his hand and released Tsuge-san from the lock.

“...Hey, boy. Get it now? Making a pass at Touko Aoi ends up like this.”

Tsuge-san said in a voice full of feeling as he rubbed his arm.

“Yes, do your best to be careful not to follow Tsuge-san’s bad example and make the same mistake.”

I knew, of course. The person called Touko Aoi had not changed since I first met her five years ago. However, the one she had held down at that time had been a brutal, knife-wielding robber.

“Tsuge-san, you’ll be able to finish Genesis’s adjustments before tomorrow morning, right?”

She acted like it had nothing to do with her. Touko-san, who stood in an intimidating manner, made an innocent face as she asked of Tsuge-san, on the floor.

“…Well, we only need to do a few repairs for the hardware, but if a lot of problems haven’t cropped up in the software, we’ll just need to do a reboot. It’s not impossible for us to get him up sometime tonight if you want?”

“No, it’s fine. Naoto, you should go home for today. Come back to this floor again tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow is my first day enrolled at Yagokoro High School.”

“Yeah, I know. So come here before you go to school. It’s about five minutes from the station to the school, but there are a lot of things I want to explain to you, so please hurry and remain on standby.”

“Touko, you can’t mean to have Genesis and the boy confront each other?”

“Rather than confronting each other, I mean to have Naoto and Genesis act as partners and investigate this ‘Yagokoro High School student disappearance case’ together.”

At that point, an unexpected suggestion came from Touko-san’s mouth.

“Whoa, that’s pretty rough. Boy, don’t lose heart, okay?”

“Touko-san, that’s–”

“You may think I owe you an explanation, Naoto, but I’ll give you and Genesis the details together early tomorrow morning.”

It was a stiff tone that brooked no argument.

After a moment of hesitation, I took the teacup in my hand, whispered “…Understood,” and along with the black, bitter liquid that had gone cold, swallowed down my words of protest completely.

Chapter 3: White and Black

[In addition to referring to “complete opposites”, this is also a nod to Naoto and Sousei’s surnames — the “shiro” in “Shirogane” means white, and the “kuro” in “Kurogami” is black.]

April 1 Yagokoro Police Fifth Basement Floor Special Forensics Division

The next morning at six AM, I was in the director’s office drinking the wake-up coffee that Tsuge-san had made. The coffee was perfect in the chilly air that suffused the fifth basement floor.

“Hoho… Boy, that really looks good on you!”

Tsuge-san was energetic even in the morning.

“…Haa, thank you, very much.”

On the other hand, it was only natural that I should give such an unenergetic answer. Though I was a girl, being fussed over as one was troublesome to begin with.

As was to be expected, the Yagokoro High School uniform that had been prepared for me was that of a "male student". Of course, if a girls' sailor uniform had been prepared, I would also have been lost. As far as the problem of my body went, my feelings were complex.

"...Tsuge-san, coffee for me too. Thanks as always."

Touko-san entered the director's office, languidly brushing up her glossy black hair. After throwing out a single "Good morning" in greeting, she audaciously threw her curvy body across the sofa.

"I see you're working hard this morning, Touko-san."

"...I didn't sleep."

"Was there a problem with something?"

"...The other matter. I have to devote all my time to it, so it's really a great help that I can leave the Yagokoro High School case to Naoto."

Incidentally, it didn't seem that Touko-san cared at

all that I was dressed as a male student.

Touko-san knew my true gender. On the contrary, when we first met and I appeared much more androgynous than I do now, she said, "...What a cute girl," and realized my gender at first glance like few people had before.

It may have been that, because I myself was as uncertain as I looked, I was unconcerned with limiting how I acted in front of other people.

"Yes, Queen, the strong lukewarm coffee you ordered."

"Ah, that's right, you were drinking lukewarm coffee yesterday too, right, Touko-san? Is there a reason for that?"

I had the memory of Touko-san unhesitatingly choosing the stainless steel cup to which Tsuge-san had added the "least hot" coffee yesterday.

"...It's so I can be ready if anything happens. The faster I can down it the sooner I can mobilize, right?"

As I looked at Touko-san, who answered with a serious expression, I nodded in admiration. “I see.” Giving deep thought to even seemingly trivial matters was just like Touko-san, and I honestly respected her for it, but:

“She’s lying, you know. She just can’t take hot food. Touko’s always been bad with hot things.”

Tsuge-san whispered into my ear as he passed right beside me. At the same time as I was surprised that even the absolutely flawless Touko Aoi had a weak point, Touko-san, who had been bluffing, laughed cutely.

While taking a cup from Tsuge-san, Touko-san said, “How is he?” and lifted her upper body from the sofa sleepily. “It’s pretty soon, but he can go,” Tsuge-san responded, and Touko-san said, “Naoto has school, so I’d like you to hurry,” downed her coffee in one go, swung both her legs like a pendulum, and sprang up from the sofa.

I also reluctantly left the director’s office to move to

the adjustment room where Genesis was sleeping.

I still harbored a bit of a grudge. Touko-san had her reasons and was keeping silent, but I was skeptical about her real intentions in making Genesis and I into partners.

I would not be able to work with someone who acted like he would kill me without even harboring any ill will, even if it wasn't on purpose. In this case, if our two-man cell encountered danger while conducting an investigation, we would not be able to each entrust our back to our partners, as would be normal, and so it would be much preferable and I would feel more at ease if I were to conduct an independent investigation.

On this floor with a good view all around, only the adjustment room was enclosed in white walls.

The twisted iron door grated as Tsuge-san opened it. The inside of the room was crowded and lined with digital machinery. In the center of the room was a leather-covered reclining chair like one might find

in a dental clinic, and Genesis in question was sleeping on that chair. His sleeping face was calm, as if yesterday's beastlike form had been a lie.

"Let's reboot him."

When Tsuge-san gave the signal, his subordinates in the room, the men in white lab coats, began to skillfully operate their keyboards while checking the huge display in front of them. When done, they hit the enter key so forcefully the noise was audible.

Incomprehensible character strings began to rapidly scroll across the display like a computer starting up. Then at the end, only one sentence, "ALL COMPLETE", remained on the display.

The excessive machinery in front of me made me remember. Something like, "What was the experiment about?"

Tsuge-san had told me, "In the middle of the mind interference experiment, Genesis went berserk." It was an explanation that I was unable to understand, as I was ignorant about robots.

I might as well try inquiring into the reason again. As I thought that, Genesis's eyelids fluttered open as he lay stretched out on the chair in the center of the room. The light in his eyes had calmed down. His gaze wandered across his surroundings as if to ascertain the situation, until he was looking in our direction. At the same time, Genesis's voice came forth.

"Gramps! You bastard! You screwed up again!"

The first words he spoke were swears.

"Don't fuck with me! You crackpot scientist!"

Genesis jumped up from the chair like a spring, and the multiple colored cords connected to his body writhed like snakes and danced in the air all at once.

"Shut your trap! I warned you in the beginning there was a high chance of failure and you should give up!"

"You called yourself a top-class scientist and said you'd make it work!"

As Genesis ranted, his long legs took one stride after another in our direction.

“That’s why you’re called a crackpot, Gramps!”

“You’re the only one who calls me that!”

Genesis and Tsuge-san argued fiercely in each other’s faces and glared at each other.

“Umm, Touko-san, by any chance, could he still be berserk…?”

I asked, and, “…No, this is ‘normal’ for him.” Touko-san shook her head as she massaged her temples with the tips of her fingers.

“…Really.”

I became seriously worried about the future.

I also thought so yesterday, but from this close, Genesis was very tall. He was slender when compared to the large Tsuge-san, but there was little difference in height. Touko-san was also tall for a woman, but even so, if the two of them stood back-to-back she would be about one head shorter than

him, and as for me, there was a large height difference similar to that between an adult and a child.

The thing that surprised me most was Genesis's "humanness." I did not know any other Suppression Weapon that was able to use such fluent language as he. Though it wasn't like his rude speech up until now was anything to be praised.

Touko-san moved, exasperated at the argument with no end in sight that the two of them were having.

"Both of you, be quiet."

Touko-san declared coldly, and without wasting any movements, she grabbed their collars and spun them around. Coupled with her lack of sleep, they had put her in an unusually unpleasant mood.

The two of them stopped with their mouths half-open. It was surprising the way in which they both immediately made faces that said they were in a bad situation.

"...Che, Touko's mad at us because you were so loud, Gramps."

"...You too, Genesis. Don't blame it all on me."

"Oi! Gramps! How many times do I have to tell you not to call me by that codename 'Genesis'! My name is Sousei! 'Sousei Kurogami'!"

[read Genesis, written something like "Sousei Record"]

"Don't tell me to do things I shouldn't in the Special Forensics Division! It's good practice to call you by codename with the researchers! Touko is the only one who knows that Sousei means you!"

"...Didn't you hear me tell you to be quiet? We don't have much time."

Needless to say, the two of them instantly fell silent in the face of Touko-san's overwhelming intensity. It seemed that not just Tsuge-san, but even Genesis regarded Touko-san as an absolute authority.

"Naoto, I'll introduce you again. This foul-mouthed

kid will be your partner, Sousei Kurogami, formerly known as Genesis."

"Ah? Touko, who the hell is this shorty?"

Sousei Kurogami stood with his arms folded and gazed down at me condescendingly.

“I explained it to you the other day, Sousei. This is Naoto Shirogane, the detective who will be investigating the ‘Yagokoro High School student disappearance case’ with you.”

Between his current rude behavior and yesterday’s violence, I still harbored a grudge, but nevertheless I said, “I’m Naoto Shirogane,” and bowed my head deeply, so as not to show a lack of manners at our first meeting.

“Oi oi. You’re joking, right?. You’re making someone as great as me babysit?”

Sousei Kurogami laughed deep in his throat.

“Anyway, I don’t feel like cooperating with the police at all, got it? I don’t have any intention of smoldering in this place forever. I want to go back to the Kirijo research facility as soon as possible and start the mission I should be doing as a Suppression Weapon!”

Touko-san laughed indulgently.

“So? Who was it exactly that smoldered away for how many years in that research facility? Well, Tsuge-san?”

“If I remember right, it was a robot who calls himself Sousei Kurogami, right?”

In the next moment, Sousei Kurogami raised his voice.

“W-wait! That was just because my Persona was in the ‘non-combative category’ and couldn’t fight! It definitely wasn’t because I was unreliable!”

It seemed like his Persona was also a non-combative-type.

“But now I’ve even successfully summoned a new combative-type Persona that can fight!”

Sousei Kurogami wore a truly frustrated expression. I see. Putting together the fragments of information, because he did not have a combative-type Persona, Genesis was labeled a “defective product” among the Suppression Weapons.

“Sousei!” Touko-san reprimanded him. “…Face reality. The summoning messed up.”

“That’s not all. You didn’t see it, Sousei, but you caused trouble for a lot of people when you lost your senses. Especially this boy, you attacked and nearly killed him, you know?”

Wearing a bitter expression, Sousei Kurogami sent me a fleeting look.

“…How would I know?. But it’s bad for people outside the division to come to this floor during a summoning.”

That was my limit. My distrust of Sousei Kurogami could increase no further.

“Touko-san. I apologize, but I will proceed with this investigation ‘by myself’. Please excuse me.”

I swiftly informed them and turned on my heel towards the elevator.

The reason was not just that I was angry. If I thought objectively, I would not be at all able to handle self-

absorbed people such as Sousei Kurogami. It was a problem on which the other being a robot or a human had no bearing.

“Naoto, wait. I didn’t want to say it like this unless I absolutely had to, but please indulge me and let me speak.”

From behind me, Touko-san’s authoritative voice flowed.

“Naoto Shirogane, this is an order. Partner with Sousei Kurogami and investigate the ‘Yagokoro High School student disappearance case’.”

Furthermore, Touko-san added in an overbearing manner, “I’ll be your supervisor within this jurisdiction. You could say I’m your direct superior. You get it, don’t you? My orders are absolute.”

“...Please tell me the reason for this.”

I looked back over my shoulder and stared straight at Touko-san.

“I don’t want to say it like this either, but you do

know I was nearly killed by him? Even so, there must be some reason for making him my partner, correct? If that isn't the case, I cannot consent."

I declared in one breath. Everything I had kept to myself came bursting out at once.

When I saw Sousei Kurogami out of the corner of my eye, he was standing with his arms crossed, wearing a complicated expression that I thought may have been apologetic.

"I didn't really decide this on a whim. This was my intention from the beginning. That I sent word to you so that you would come to the Special Forensics Division office was also because I wanted you to meet Sousei."

Touko-san began speaking in a composed voice.

"It's common knowledge that Naoto Shirogane is an excellent detective and the Shirogane lineage and the police go way back; even so, there is a deep-seated reluctance among the police to submit investigation requests to outside individuals.

They're guys who believe it's a matter of honor."

Touko-san snorted as if to say they were stupid.

"In the beginning, I thought that I'd leave the investigation up to your judgment as an outside contractor, Naoto. At the same time, we would use this as a practice test to determine Sousei's capabilities. Sousei and Naoto are both unmistakably outsiders from the police. The installation of the Special Forensics Division isn't common either. That in itself is using up some of the budget. If we don't show some results soon, the big shots will start complaining."

"It's asking too much for them to give us money and keep their mouths shut. The stuff that comes out of the mouths of total amateurs is really just annoying to us researchers."

Tsuge-san shrugged his shoulders as he rolled his eyes.

"Also, taking into account the connection between the two incidents where Sousei's rampage was

stopped and where Naoto awakened to a new Persona, anyone would believe their partnership to be extremely fortuitous."

"I see." I readily grasped the first reason.

Even if it was the prestigious Shirogane family, naturally a complicated situation arose between the detectives and the police with the power of the state. I was familiar with that kind of treatment from my own experience.

Touko-san heartily slapped Sousei Kurogami's rear.

"Hey! Touko!"

Without paying any mind to his confusion, Touko-san said with an extremely serious expression, "You should get along as fellow Persona-users. For now, give each other a 'goodwill handshake'.

"What is it? Hurry and shake hands."

Even at Touko-san's urging, my arm would not stretch out obediently. My reasons for wanting to escape from a partnership with Sousei Kurogami

were not logical, but rather emotional.

I was not confident that I would be able to well handle an impulsive person such as him. I still had not received an apology from him concerning yesterday's incident. In addition to my dissatisfaction with his behavior, Sousei Kurogami also seemed uninterested in shaking my hand. As the victim, I had a better reason. Even if he didn't remember going berserk, it did not mean I had to voluntarily acquiesce. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to shake his hand.

However, Touko-san finally said, "It's fate. Shake hands immediately," in a tone that said she would brook no argument, and we reluctantly shook hands.

Sousei Kurogami had an unusually large hand befitting his body. It was a bit formal, but the feel of his palm did not differ from my own.

Touko-san explained the general situation of the "Yagokoro High School student disappearance case" and quickly finished with, "I want you to read the

report yourselves and drill the details of the case into your heads."

"...Whatever. The faster we finish this job, the faster I can blow this joint! So let's go, shorty!" Sousei Kurogami moved energetically to flee the room, but I immediately called him to stop: "Wait."

"Please don't call me that. I'm not a 'shorty'. My name is Naoto Shirogane."

Besides, I was not particularly short, but rather, Sousei Kurogami was so tall he would stand out in a crowd.

"...Huh?" Sousei Kurogami looked openly annoyed, as if he did not care about my objections.

"What, it's the truth, you know? Nothing wrong with calling a shorty a shorty."

"In that case, what if I called you 'Simple-Minded-san'?"

"The hell! Who are you calling simple-minded? You picking a fight?"

“Aren’t those hasty reactions of yours ‘simple-minded’?”

Though Sousei Kurogami was threatening me from so close, I responded in a calm tone without batting an eye. “…Ugh.” Sousei Kurogami let out a short noise from his throat.

“For now, since we’ll be acting together as partners, please call me by my name. Then I’ll call you by name too.”

“…Damn, you’re a cheeky bastard.”

“My name is not ‘cheeky bastard’. Don’t get it wrong, ‘Simple-Minded-san’. All right? I’ll say it again. My name is Naoto–”

“Ahh! Geez! Shut up! I got it! I get it already! It’s Naoto! Naoto! That’s fine, right? So then you call me ‘Sousei-sama’.”

“Yes, understood, ‘Sousei-san’.”

“…You!”

“Ah, if we don’t hurry, class will end. Hurry up,

Sousei-san. Won't Touko-san get mad again if you're too slow?"

"...Y-yeah."

I was not satisfied, but I gave a sideways glance at Sousei-san, who was nodding, and allowed myself a secret smile of relief. It could be said that our first meeting was tolerable.

Truthfully, losing my temper at Sousei-san was according to plan.

"Since I wanted the investigation to go smoothly, I wanted Naoto to grasp Sousei's hand tightly," was the advice that I received from Touko-san, which was helpful, but seemed likely to make my head hurt.

I needed to be able to control my investigation partner, more for my own sake than anyone else's.

Sometimes crime scene investigations required attention to detail and patience, and so if Sousei-san, who was impulsive, was left to do as he pleased, who

knew what would happen. A large sigh escaped me as if in answer.

April 1 Yagokoro Police Station Parking Lot

It was several minutes after being delayed by Sousei-san. I had come to the back of the office that had been designated when we parted, but there was no one waiting, and all that was in front of my eyes were a number of police cars and a red sports bike.

I wondered if he had been impatient and gone on to school alone.

I had not meant to make him wait. However, I was caught by the assistant chief as I was leaving the office, so I had given up. I was finally released when I had reluctantly been made to give my autograph, which I had never done before.

"...Can't he have waited even a few minutes? Honestly, it looks like this will be tough."

It was right after that.

"–Ah? Isn't it obvious? I won't forgive you for

making my great self wait even one second!”

I immediately spun around and looked at my surroundings. It was only natural. That had been Sousei-san’s voice, but his body was nowhere to be seen.

“Oi! Naoto! Over here, over here!”

“...Eh?” I couldn’t help the sound of surprise that escaped me. That was because I could hear Sousei-san’s voice coming from the red bike.

“...Eh!”

In the next moment, I was struck speechless. I was so shocked I couldn’t believe it.

To explain the reason, as I watched the red bike, it changed shape, and the next thing I knew, it had assumed Sousei-san’s form. A bike had transformed into a human figure right in front of my eyes.

“So? Did that surprise you? I’m a ‘transforming robot’! So you see, I’m different from those other robots!”

It was true that I was quite shocked. I, who still loved making plans for intricate devices, said, "… Amazing… That's amazing! Sousei-san!" and was excited. What in the world were the mechanics behind it?

"I want to take you apart sometime…"

"Eh?"

Sousei-san was looking at me dubiously. It seemed like I had somehow inadvertently spoken my true thoughts aloud.

"I-it's nothing…"

Without thinking, I averted my eyes. I was embarrassed that I had forgotten myself in my excitement.

"…You're weird. Well, whatever. Anyway, get on."

The distance was not so great that I would be opposed to going on foot, but because Sousei-san said he would take me to school, I jumped onto Sousei-san, who had once again eagerly turned into

a bike.

It was a sports bike characterized by a beautiful streamlined form. It seemed to be a bike meant for racing. If I straddled it, I felt that I myself might become a bike racer, and though we had not yet set off, I found myself lost in daydreams. However, Sousei-san's words as he continued dragged me back to reality.

"I thought you're really tiny, but your body's light too, Naoto. Are you really a guy?"

I wondered if Sousei-san was joking. But he had a point, and so I sighed, "Haa..." and felt upset without much reason.

"Hold on tight!"

Sousei-san started to move. At the same time, my cheeks became hot. Just now, when I became conscious of my gender, the present situation in which I was straddling him between my legs embarrassed me again.

“Well, to be honest I don’t really like letting a guy ride, but you’re my partner so I guess I gotta. You’re special, Naoto! Be grateful to me!”

It was not my intention to hide my gender. It just so happened that I was presenting myself as a male student. That I spoke as I did and conducted myself as a boy was force of habit after many years.

[technically that she calls herself “boku”]

“…Yes. Um, thank you very much.”

I could not help but feel that I had missed the moment when I should have explained the truth.

Like the downtown school that it was, Yagokoro High School faced the street, and because it was morning, there was a large volume of traffic. That was where the bike came in handy. It nimbly weaved its way through the congested vehicles and arrived in the blink of an eye in front of the main gate.

The towering gate was made of brick. The white

iron fences were also of elaborate design. The school building inside was not old but it had a retro design. Much money had gone into every aspect of the building, as was typical of an affluent private school.

–Yagokoro Private High School. It was the only private school in the Yagokoro area, and the number of students in the whole school was about one hundred people in each year, or three hundred students total. It was within the prefecture but was a prominent high school focused on preparing students for university.

It seemed that many students still commuted from the suburbs. Even when I was gazing at the school, students continued to be swallowed into the solemn gate one after another. However, as could be expected, I was the only one of the students in front of the gate who had driven up on a motorbike, and so I stood out immensely.

I briefly thought that this could be bad and was just thinking that we should remove ourselves to a place

with fewer people. Sousei-san, whom I had been riding, changed back into human form, causing a stir among the crowd of people going to school.

“Geez, they’re all brats!”

He was drawing attention to himself, but even so, Sousei-san did not care in the slightest. On the other hand, Sousei-san had taken human form without so much as a word to me, so I had fallen on my behind on the asphalt like a cowboy that had made a mistake during a rodeo.

“...Eh? What’s that?” “A r-robot? Is it real?” “Are they filming a movie?” “No, isn’t it the robot the principal was talking about at the school assembly?” “Wha? He said something like that?”

The students were giving Sousei-san sidelong glances and whispering among themselves. It was as if they were meeting an alien creature.

I shook my head at the ring of students around us, keeping their distance. That we had stood out like this from the very beginning made me depressed.

On the way to the staff room, I said:

“Do you understand? Will you behave yourself as much as you can while I’m in class?”

I did not forget to give Sousei-san a warning based on his actions at the gate.

Concerning the presence of the robot called Sousei Kurogami within the school, it seemed that the police’s efforts had secured approval for him from the school. The information the students had been given had been something like “A cutting-edge robot will be visiting to collect data from the classes.”

However, seeing how wary the students were, it could not be said that they really had any understanding of Sousei-san, and if he did as he wanted, the resulting disturbance would be more attention-grabbing than a fire.

“Yeah! Leave it to me! I’ll investigate perfectly until after school!”

My warning did not reach him at all. My head was

starting to hurt.

“In any case, you must absolutely not cause a disturbance.”

“You’re really annoying!”

“Do you know whose fault it is that I must be annoying?”

“Huh? Don’t you just have no balls?”

“If there’s any sort of problem, I’ll report it to Touko-san, all right?”

“Hah! What a cowardly shorty, bringing up Touko’s name like that!”

That was the limit of my patience. Something snapped within me at being branded a coward.

“Did you already forget the disturbance you caused at the school gate? If so, you must be unbelievably birdbrained!”

Because I raised my voice, the students inside the classroom glanced at us simultaneously.

“What was that! Who are you calling a birdbrain! You moron! Want me to shut that cheeky mouth of yours for you?”

Agitated, Sousei-san grabbed and lifted my collar. Unusually, the blood had also rushed to my head, and I matched Sousei-san’s in-my-face glare with one of my own. It was an explosive situation.

It was at that moment. The voice of what sounded like a cute girl echoed down the hall.

“Big broooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

“N-no way! Don’t screw with me! Damn, give me a break…”

The moment the girl’s voice reached his ears, Sousei-san became depressed as if the fire in him had completely disappeared.

I glanced in the direction from which the voice had come. “Whoa! Something’s coming!” The students that had come out into the hall jumped back to the walls to the left and right as if making way for Moses

with the Ten Commandments.

This was a school hallway. Even so, why was it that I could hear the sound of an engine approaching as if from far away?

The surprising answer came several seconds later. I couldn't believe my eyes, but what was approaching was not the young girl I had imagined from the sound of the voice – it was a scooter-type motorbike. It was an unmanned bike that closely resembled the famous Italian vespa, but it ran with the brisk sound of the engine echoing through the hallway.

"Big bro! Big bro! Can you do something for me?"

Like a small dog frolicking around its master, the unmanned bike ran in circles around Sousei-san.

"Shut up! Don't run around me! Take human form if you want to talk!"

"Ah, I forgot."

Again, I couldn't believe my eyes. It wasn't the first time a motorbike had transformed right in front of

me, but this time it became a “girl”, so I was unable to remain composed. “Oh!” The students who were peering timidly in our direction also raised their voices in cries of surprise.

“That girl… is a robot…?” “…Isn’t she pretty cute?” “Yeah. So cute…”

As the students’ excitement showed, she was a lovely robot with a beautiful outward appearance.

From the fact that she too was able to transform from a bike, I deduced that she must also be a robot from the same generation as Sousei-san. Most likely she originated from the Kirijo Group. She might also have been a specialized Suppression Weapon. However, she was about half Sousei-san’s size. Her physical appearance also differed from the male Sousei-san’s, as she was a girl who looked to be about twelve human years old.

That beautiful female robot planted her hands on her hips and looked up at Sousei-san.

“Umm, when you finish work, I want you to buy the things on this list from the Junes in front of the station and bring them home.”

“Huh? You should just make Gramps buy it!”

“Sheesh! You always say things like that right away, Big Bro! We’re relying on Uncle Tetsuma, so you and ‘Ai’ should at least do the shopping.”

“Then ‘Ai’ should go. Leave me out of it!”

“It’s impossible for Ai! I’m busy with my chores, so I can’t do it today! That’s why I’m leaving it to you, Big Bro. Ah, I’m out of time, I have to go. Don’t forget to go shopping. Also, don’t cause trouble for other people! Ai is the one who always has to apologize afterward! So be good! Promise!”

The beautiful girl, with her cheeks puffed out, told him in a forceful tone as if for emphasis, suddenly shoved the memo into Sousei-san’s hands, and changed into a bike again.

“Oi! Ai! Wait! Wait up!

“Hey! Get back here!” Sousei-san’s attempts to get her to stop were in vain, as she slipped between the students, and with an energetic speed, disappeared down the hallway.

The mysterious robot girl had arrived and then departed like a shot. I was dumbfounded along with everyone else in the hallway, staring at the direction in which the girl had disappeared. Sousei-san’s shoulders slumped dejectedly.

I asked Sousei-san, and as I thought, that girl was also a specialized Suppression Weapon developed by the Kirijo Group. Looking tired, he answered that her name was “Ai Kurogami” and she was his successor.

The chime that marked the beginning of class resounded through the hallway and we finally came back to ourselves.

“…Er, she’s quite an energetic little sister, isn’t she?”

“…Yeah, uh, sorry about her.”

In the face of the storm called “Ai-chan”, the turbulent seas between us were only a trivial phenomenon.

April 1 Yagokoro High School

It was not the first time I stood in front of a class as a transfer student, but no matter how many times I did, the nervousness that accompanied this moment was not something I could grow accustomed to. At the homeroom teacher’s urging, I introduced myself, but:

“…Starting today, I’ll be relying on you for a while. My name is Naoto Shirogane.”

My words rang a bit hollow. Enduring my embarrassment, I raised my bowed head. When I did, the classroom was perplexingly filled with shouting. In particular, the cheers of the female students flew around the classroom, their lovely voices fiercely calling out “Prince!”, and even at the severe remonstrations of the homeroom teacher, who could not just stand idly and watch, the noise

did not quiet down.

It was true that being welcomed was far preferable to being rejected, but I really could not hide my bewilderment at such an overly warm welcome.

“I’m so happy! I’m a fan of yours, Shirogane-kun!”

The girl in the seat next to mine spoke rapidly. “I’m Takizawa!” she introduced herself, and asked with some agitation, “…Is it all right if I get a picture later?”

When I asked, “…Why?”, the girl responded with a dizzying answer. “Huh? You don’t know, Shirogane-kun? Right now, there’s a ‘Detective Prince craze’ on the Internet.”

“Look! A collection of Prince photos on the Internet!”

I saw the display on the cell phone she held out and became more and more embarrassed. No, it went so far as to be frightening.

As to why, there were countless pictures of myself which I had no memory of being taken.

Furthermore, until just now when word of this reached my ears, I, the one in question, had really not known of this “Detective Prince craze”.

It was discomfiting to know that my name had been spread somewhere without my participation. It was the sort of bewilderment one might feel if told by a doctor that they were a somnambulist.

My fame this time may have been due to good will gone wrong; however, if by any chance it was ill-intentioned – just imagining it, a shiver ran down my spine.

In the next moment, Kujikawa-san’s face surfaced in my mind. How much hardship did she suffer as a famous idol? It was surely the case that every day, she was the target of much more dangerous thoughts than I was.

Even so, my apologies to Kujikawa-san, but I thought, “Ah, it isn’t just me,” and was strangely reassured.

Only one week had passed since I had last seen her,

but suddenly I felt nostalgic at the thought of Kujikawa-san. She was high-handed and impudent and was always looking ahead, and I strongly wanted to hear her voice.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as saying, "If you want to hear her voice, then call her." I could never say such an embarrassing thing, and if I did, her triumphant reaction would be annoying.

And so I spent the remainder of the class time thinking up excuses to call her tonight.

I adhered to the precept of "do your own legwork" that was the most basic of the basics of investigating.

For example, even if it was something written in the investigation file, if one went to the actual scene and made observations, it was often the case that they would have a different impression. Many times in the past, there had been cases where I had come upon a new line of reasoning by being able to look at the situation from a different point of view. Thus, I usually wanted to visit the actual scene as far as I

was able and confirm with my own eyes and ears the details of the case. I thought what people said in the past, that "Hearing a hundred times does not compare to seeing just once," was exactly the truth.

But it could be said that the case this time was quite tough. It seemed that "my legs would become tired." I had mixed feelings about it, but it seemed that the "Detective Prince craze" was a blessing.

"You came to investigate the disappearances, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. That's the only reason the prince would come to a remote school like ours, isn't it?"

From the beginning, the people around me were cooperative about the investigation. Though in particular, they were the female students and students who introduced themselves as members of the newspaper club.

During break time, my seat was surrounded by female students overflowing with curiosity. "Get mochi from mochi sellers and information from newspaper reporters!" said the wildly excited

newspaper club, and though I didn't ask, they gave me information pertaining to the disappearance case. It did feel a bit anticlimactic, but I wondered if I should be grateful for everyone's curiosity. It was just that I was fed up with the fact that I did not even have the freedom to stand from my seat and go to the restroom.

Just as had been in Touko-san's explanation and report, the ones who disappeared were two students of Yagokoro High School. I had heard before that it had now been approximately two weeks since the beginning of the incident.

The first one who had disappeared was a then-first-year female student, Miyuki Midorikawa (16).

The one who disappeared next was a then-second-year male student, Shirou Konno (17).

"A connection between them? I never even saw them talking to each other."

"I never heard about it either. She's a delinquent and he's the student council president. There's no

way they would be involved with each other."

According to the newspaper club's information, it seemed that the two missing students did not have any particular connection. That was consistent with the investigation report I had received from Touko-san.

"You want to know more about them, right? Won't you come to the newspaper club room?"

It was data on the case that they, students of this school like the missing persons, had collected themselves. I had no reason to refuse. I headed to their club room. The newspaper club was borrowing one dusty corner of the document room.

According to their data, Miyuki Midorikawa had problems with her behavior and lifestyle, her grades had slumped, and she was insulted as a "delinquent" behind her back; the male students she had relations with were an extremely far cry from honor students.

On the other hand, Shirou Konno had impeccable

conduct and excellent grades, and furthermore, was so much an honor student that he served as student council president. He was popular among the female students, but there were no particular stories of frivolous behavior.

The two of them were exact opposites and had no relation. We had thought of it as a serial disappearance case, but at present it was difficult to find a connection between them, so rather, I could only think that it would be more appropriate to believe that the two had gone missing for different reasons within a similar time frame.

I had finished inspecting the data, said “You’ve been of great help,” and it was just before I exited the small room.

It was said there was always a price to pay for good information, and the students of the newspaper club entreated me, “In return for us giving you the data, we want to write a ‘Know Everything About the Prince’ interview article…” I had no reason to

refuse. No, there was no way I could refuse now. I said evasively, “Sometime soon…” and left the room.

Lunch break. While eating lunch in the school cafeteria with my female classmates, another intriguing rumor was mixed into information about the disappearances. It was about a certain incident involving the death of a female student.

“Right, this isn’t related to the disappearances, but half a year ago a second-year female student at this school died.”

“…Oh, that incident? That thing with the train… wah, just thinking about it makes me feel cold…”

It seemed that, about half a year ago, there had been an accident where a then-second-year female student fell from the Yagokoro Station platform, was hit by a train, and died. It had unfortunately been a limited express train. The limbs of the girl who was hit had been scattered across the platform. It seemed the scene at the time had been exceedingly gruesome.

They had not found a suicide note or will, so the police had declared the female student's death an "accident". However, the students knew that the girl had been worried about the Internet slander directed at her since about two months before her death, and there were still some who whispered that it had been "suicide". In the end, it seemed it was only on the level of a rumor and the authenticity could not be verified.

In truth, it was a very intriguing story. My detective soul ached to begin an investigation immediately. However, it was unfortunate, but right now there were a large number of other matters that took precedence.

At the end of homeroom, the teacher told me sullenly, "Shirogane. Come to the staff room." Having no idea why I would be scolded by the teacher, I knitted my eyebrows dubiously and followed behind the teacher.

"Your 'companion' has been causing trouble within

the school, Shirogane. Honestly, it's still just the first day…"

These were the details. While the female students were changing clothes after physical education, a boy with clothes of black and red said "I'm coming in," threw the door open energetically, and invaded the locker room. As the dumbfounded female students returned to their senses and began to panic: "You're noisy! Don't shout! Like I give a damn about naked humans!" He became angry at them for their embarrassment instead of the other way around, and in the end, when he was chased after by the teachers who came running toward the commotion, "Che," he clicked his tongue, jumped out the window, and fled. By the way, the girls' changing room was on the third floor of the building.

"We had no choice but to approve the presence of that strange character in the school by request of the police. It's too late and something has already happened to the students. Shirogane, if you don't take responsibility and keep an eye on him, there

will be trouble."

Having finished listening to my homeroom teacher's lecture, it was inevitable that I could only let out a leaden sigh.

April 1 Yagokoro High School Rooftop

After school, I removed myself from the public eye and visited the roof at twilight, and the first words to leave my mouth were to quietly, perhaps cruelly, tell the red and black-clothed person whose large body that was hunched over small before my eyes:

"...Just as I promised, I will tell Touko-san about this."

I took my cell phone from the pocket of my uniform and:

"No, don't! Wait, wait! Listen to what I have to say first!"

Sousei-san panicked and stole my cell phone from me.

"...Are you trying to say that there is any legitimate

reason at all in this world for you to brazenly invade the girls' changing room?"

I hit him with my cold gaze as with an uppercut, and:

"Ah, no, I really wasn't thinking. I know it was wrong. But! I definitely didn't do it because I wanted to peek or anything!"

Sousei-san stared at nothing and mussed the hair on the back of his head as if he knew he was in a bad situation.

"...In that case, what are you saying was the reason?"

I stole back my cell phone. Then Sousei-san whispered with a serious expression.

"I thought I would do my own investigation while you were in class, Naoto..."

Sousei-san quickly cast his gaze around. There were only two shadows, one long and one short, stretched out across the concrete floor. After making sure that

no one else was nearby, Sousei-san called out.

“–Come out! Tsukuyomi!”

When I laid eyes on the jet-black existence that manifested behind Sousei-san, I unconsciously spoke. “Persona…” It was a Persona with a massive body, matching that of Sousei-san, and its special characteristic was a design reminiscent of an electronic marquee on its head.

“The ability of my great Tsukuyomi is the ‘power to hear the voices left behind by the dead’.”

“That old man Tsuge called my ability something like ‘Past Reading’.”

“Wow…” My admiration slipped through. It was a very interesting ability.

“Hmph, but after all it’s a silly power, just being able to detect the past conversations of dead guys and transcribe them.”

“Um, I’d just like to make sure, but are you saying you can’t transcribe the conversations of living people?”

Sousei-san nodded.

“In the end it’s only if they’re dead. Then it’s ‘transcribing’ like I said, so what I can detect isn’t a picture or voices but just ‘words’. Instead I can visualize the words and a third party can read them. Look at Tsukuyomi’s face. The words that I detected are scrolling on this black part.”

It seemed that, just as it appeared, Tsukuyomi’s head played the role of an electronic marquee.

“It’s truly an amazing ability.”

There were limits, but if we figured out how to put it to practical use, it seemed like it would be an ability that would be of great help in the investigation.

“Hmph! This ability! I can’t stand it!”

It was a compliment that I truly meant rather than flattery, but Sousei-san shook his head with a grim expression. Judging by Sousei-san’s arrogant personality, it seemed that he was not simply being modest.

“...I see. In other words, Sousei-san wandered the

school in order to detect the conversations of the dead?"

"Yeah." Sousei-san grinned as he continually nodded.

"Think about it. What if the two students who disappeared aren't in this world anymore?"

"...Ah, you mean the possibility that you would detect and transcribe their conversations?"

"Exactly." Sousei-san thrust out his chest proudly.

It was unfortunate, but I could only conclude that Sousei-san's deduction was not off the mark. About two weeks had passed since the disappearance of the two students. From experience, I had to say there was a high probability that the two were no longer alive.

"Naoto, you've got pretty good judgment, don't you? Doesn't look like you're stupid. You're qualified to be partnered with my great self."

"...Thank you," was my only reply, and, "I'm also

relieved that you're not as much of a fool as I thought," did not leave my mouth, but I kept it to myself.

"So? How is this related to the incident in which you invaded the girls' changing room?"

If his goal had been to see if he could detect Miyuki Midorikawa's past conversations, it would have been completely unnecessary to do so while the female students were changing clothes.

"...That's because my ability, uh, doesn't have a really wide range of effect, or to be more specific, it's good for a five-meter radius around me..."

Sousei-san spoke with an expression like he was sulking.

"You're a Persona-user too so you know, right, Naoto? You're concentrating really hard when you're invoking your ability..."

"...In other words, something like this? You were concentrating on using your Persona's ability and

weren't really looking around you, so you inadvertently entered the girls' changing room?"

"Yeah! It couldn't be helped!"

"...You astound me," I grumbled from my heart at the boy whose white teeth were showing in a smile.

"...I don't think it's the case, but you didn't let anyone see your Persona, right?"

"Don't say stupid things! Like I'd screw up like that! Even if I saw those brats in their underwear, I wouldn't let them see my Persona!"

I pressed my fingers against my temples. I withdrew my previous remarks. This person may have been much more of a fool than I thought.

"So? What did you accomplish, along with causing a riot?"

"...Hey, it's like how the sun can't always make every day clear and bright. Things don't always go that well, you know?"

I gave a sidelong glance at Sousei-san, who was

gazing distantly at the setting sun, and let out a large sigh. I could not help but feel that I had sighed enough for a year in today alone.

"Oh, by the way, what kind of ability do you have, Naoto?"

Sousei-san asked. Because of all the commotion, I had been putting it off completely, but because it was his partner's Persona, I should have revealed it to him sooner.

"'A picture is worth a thousand words,' isn't it?"

I nodded at Sousei-san, and with the words, "–Give me power, Amatsu Mikaboshi," I summoned my own Persona.

"...Hmm, so that's your Persona, Naoto?"

It was a Persona with an appearance similar to that of a conductor directing an orchestra. That was my Amatsu Mikaboshi. It was non-combative and not particularly gallant, but rather, its smart appearance well pleased me.

“Well then, Sousei-san. Try using Tsukuyomi’s ability.”

“Huh? Me? Even though you haven’t shown me your own ability?”

Sousei-san’s suspicion was pointless.

“Yes, that’s why ‘a picture is worth a thousand words.’”

I smiled, and Sousei-san furrowed his brow and began to concentrate. Several seconds later. Tilting his head, Sousei-san looked back over his shoulder at me.

“…Oi, oi? What’s going on?”

Sousei-san’s expression was full of surprise.

“My detection range is wider than usual… It’s doubled to ten meters… No, it covers the whole roof, could this be… My true power has finally awakened!”

Sousei-san shouted with wide eyes. Of course, when he realized my palm was resting on his back, he

said, "...there's no way, right?" and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"I get it. That's how it is. The reason my Tsukuyomi's 'Past Reading' is powered up is because of the power of your 'Amatsu Mikaboshi', right?"'

"Yes." I nodded.

"This is the ability of my 'Amatsu Mikaboshi' – the 'power to tune a Persona's ability'."

It was something I had experienced before. In the moment I summoned my Persona, all the information about "Amatsu Mikaboshi" was within me. It was a similar, instinctual knowledge as knowing that fire was hot without having to be told. This may have been due to the fact that my Persona could be called "my other self".

"When I talked to Tsuge-san about my ability, he named it 'Ability Tune'."

"...Still, it's a pretty boring ability."

“Is that so? I like it. This power.”

That was because the power I had wished for was the ability to support someone.

“But you know, if you’re alone you can’t count on it, right?”

“On the other hand, my ability can be more than helpful if I’m with another Persona-user like you, Sousei-san. How is it now? What is your impression, having used your strengthened Persona?”

Sousei-san sent a glance at his own Persona standing behind him. “…Well, you’re right, this is new.” He nodded, wearing a complex expression. I couldn’t help but feel proud at his reaction.

“Well then, we know each others’ abilities, so let’s work together and begin the investigation immediately.”

It was clear what we had to do.

My “Amatsu Mikaboshi” would strengthen Sousei-san’s “Tsukuyomi”. Then we would go around and

do an exhaustive search of the school premises. If we did not detect anything, then that was that. On the other hand, if we detected past conversations, it would be proof that someone who had once existed at this school had died. If the conversations were those of the missing students, the contents may be related to new findings unknown to the police.

“Well, let’s go.”

There was no time to lose. Well aware of the limited time we had in which to work, I took the initiative and headed for the entrance to the roof.

“Wait! Detective Prince! Before we go somewhere else, it’s not too late to take a look at ‘the past conversations detected here on the roof’, you know?”

“...You mean–”

I stopped walking and looked back. My gaze was directed at Sousei-san, the corners of whose lips were tilted upward confidently.

“I’m saying don’t be impatient. From the conversations I’ve detected, only one person has died. But you know, I haven’t been able to figure out if it’s from one of our targets or not. In the end, all ‘Tsukuyomi’ can detect are ‘the words of dead people’.”

“Yes, please leave the detailed investigation to me. I’ll see what I can infer about the person from the contents of the conversations.”

Deducing the truth from a limited amount of information – it was the perfect opportunity to display my detective spirit.

“Got it. Then I’ll show you my skills.”

Sousei-san held his palm over his head, toward Tsukuyomi, and on the marquee on its head, words that seemed to be the contents of the conversation appeared one after another one and scrolled through. It was a dizzying but exciting experience.

“…That’s right. Please allow me to ask a basic question. As far as the conversations of the dead go,

about how far back in time can you detect?"

"If it's just me, about half a year. This time I can pick up conversations from close to a year ago 'cause you're supporting me, Naoto. If you feel like it, it looks like we can go back two or three years? How 'bout it?"

I shook my head.

"No, there's no need to go that far back this time. What we're interested in is the contents of the conversations just before the disappearances. Most importantly, Miyuki Midorikawa would not have matriculated into Yagokoro High School before two years ago."

Sousei-san squinted one eye and snorted. "That's true.

"Fine, I'll go back to the beginning." Sousei-san flicked his finger in thin air as if he were manipulating a touch panel, and the words shown on the marquee rapidly scrolled back. "...Next, please." At my signal, he sent out the words in turn.

During those moments, my eyeballs were surely moving restlessly back and forth.

"...Me being a slut... Why is that sort of unfounded rumor on the 'Midnight Site'...? T-that's terrible! It's all lies! The stuff this Uzume guy is writing is all bullshit! He's gotta have something against me... Yeah, that's right... Everyone will get that it's just a misunderstanding..."

"...How could... Why... Why is everyone falling for the rumors? Why are they believing the weird things posted on the site over the words of the person herself? I really, don't get it..."

"...That Uzume guy, he knows a lot about what I do at school... He's definitely a student here! This is impossible, I can't get a break... I haven't told my brother about it... I don't want to worry him for no reason..."

"I can't trust anyone anymore! They say things that sound like they're worried but they don't get how I feel at all! I can't take this anymore! I'd rather they insult

me to my face! Give me a break! Anyone around me could really be Uzume... I'm jumping at shadows... Even you, Takizawa-san... Ah, sorry... Forget it... I'm sorry... I'm being weird...”

When the words disappeared from the marquee:

“So what's your reaction, Mr. Detective?”

Sousei-san peered into my face critically.

“It is truly valuable information.”

I was quietly excited at the results, which were beyond my expectations.

“Oh! You mean you found a clue to the disappearance case?”

“No, I don't know yet.”

“Huh? I don't get it. Then what the hell is valuable?”

“That I've determined who the past conversation belonged to. From the speech style, we can be fairly sure she was a female student. If my logic is correct, her name should be – ‘Kaoru Hioka’.”

“Kaoru Hioka…?”

His face screwed up, Sousei-san stroked his chin. It seemed he had no idea.

“Ah, I apologize. It’s a name that wasn’t in the case file we received from Touko-san. It’s information that I myself only obtained during lunchtime today–”

I explained the “train accident” that had occurred half a year ago, in which a female student of Yagokoro High School named Kaoru Hioka had died, to Sousei-san. Sousei-san was lost in thought, his expression one of having a small bone lodged in his throat. However, he soon gave up. “…Well, whatever.” I glowered at Sousei-san.

“Sousei-san? No matter how detailed it seems, please say it without reservation. When we combine information and do a detailed investigation together, we’ll approach the truth faster.”

If we did not cooperate, there was no use in having a partner.

“Nah, I just felt like I’d heard the name Kaoru Hioka before. I’ll tell you if it comes to me.”

Sousei-san did not look embarrassed. Because of that, my throat also began to feel as if something was lodged in it.

“From the rumors of the students, it seems that Kaoru Hioka was worried about slander on the ‘Midnight Site’.”

When I heard the name “Midnight Site”, I naturally recalled the “Midnight Channel”. If it were a simple case of copying the name, that would be a relief, but if its substance was similarly suspicious, it could be nothing but trouble.

“That point is in agreement with the contents of the past conversations. In addition, when we consider that her death has already been confirmed, it fulfills the condition for your ability to detect ‘the words of the past conversations of the dead’, Sousei-san.”

“Hey, no, in that case, what do you mean, because it’s already been confirmed? What’s the good in

investigating something not related to the disappearances! It's a waste of time, right?"

Sousei-san shook his head exaggeratedly and snorted.

"I just wanna solve this case fast and concentrate on what I should've been doing in the first place."

"Even if you say that, we have no other method, so it can't be helped. Right now, we can only carefully scrutinize every piece of information before us and steadily search for clues related to the disappearance case."

"Geez, you're too perfectionist!" Sousei-san pouted like a child.

"They say 'haste makes waste.' In any case, let's spend a little while collecting a large amount of information."

Honestly, who was it that said at our first meeting, "You're making someone as great as me babysit?" I completely felt like throwing those words back at

him.

“It’s because we’re lucky and have ways of obtaining information that even the police couldn’t discover during their investigation.”

Could it be called a chemical reaction between fellow Persona users? Was there value in keeping with this partner even if I had to turn a blind eye to his behavior?

He may have been conflicted, but Sousei-san ruffled his hair with a grimace.

“…Yeah! I know! We’re together, so say it! Where do we go next? We’re going around the school collecting past conversations, right?”

Despite his complaints, it seemed Sousei-san respected my opinion.

“Listen up! In return, you better power up my great Tsukuyomi perfectly!”

Could it be that he was acknowledging me a little? In any case, it was a step forward. And so I smiled and

answered.

“As expected, Sousei-san. I’m glad we resolved that quickly.”

My words were somewhat sarcastic.

April 1 Yagokoro Police Special Forensics Division

I asked Sousei-san to take me to the Yagokoro police without returning to the dormitory. That was because I had business I wanted to finish at the Special Forensics Division. Since Sousei-san had the shopping errands that his little sister Ai-chan had asked of him, he let me off at the police station and promptly ran off. An unmanned bike traveling through the city at twilight was rather surreal. The people coming and going were surprised, and it was only natural that they looked twice.

The investigation at school was discontinued at sunset. We deferred the continuation until tomorrow.

When I was returning from school, Sousei-san spoke

enthusiastically: “Naoto! Let’s look around the school tomorrow morning!”, but I answered, “That’s impossible.” “Why!” Sousei-san snarled, but I returned coldly, “Because a certain someone peeked into the girls’ changing room, if we go around the school while students are present, it will most definitely cause a riot!”, and the person in question said no more on the subject.

I gazed lethargically at the clock mounted on the wall. At that moment, it was passing nine PM. Alone in the director’s office, I had borrowed Tsuge-san’s desktop computer and was checking into some matters. Speaking of Tsuge-san, it seemed Ai-chan, who was in charge of cooking, was coming home late because of her job, and tonight he had to cook for himself, so with a loud “I’m going ahead!”, he returned first.

It wasn’t that there were no computers at the dormitory. It was simply that the computer here was of the latest model, and if I used a computer within the station, I had the advantage of being able to

access the police database.

There were two matters which I was mainly investigating. About the train accident involving Kaoru Hioka half a year ago and about the Midnight Site.

Regarding Kaoru Hioka's train accident, most of what I had heard from the students was accurate, or to put it another way, I did not glean any particularly new information. On the other hand, investigating the "Midnight Site" was a fountain of new information. It seemed that the origin of the name was that a user poll was held in the middle of the night, and at the end, that caused a judgment "decree" to be handed down at 12 AM. It was a so-called user-participation site, and nowadays, it seemed to be a popular topic on the Internet.

"I can't think of it as a rational sentence… I wonder if they mean to play God…"

I gazed at the computer screen and shivered. The thick red letters of "Midnight Site" gleamed

ominously against a black background. The reason for my vague, terrible fears about the “Midnight Site” was because I knew what it used as a topic.

That was “sin”.

Under the name “Judgment upon those who have sinned!”, users could vote guilty or not guilty on the sins of the people who had been chosen on the “Midnight Site”. Incidentally, the users of the “Midnight Site” were called jurors.

Those who could bring to trial the sins of the targets was a selection of five people who handled management and administration – five people known as the “Five Togakushi Judges”. They also enumerated the charges of the prospective sinners brought to trial.

[Lit. “hiding door”. “Togakushi” is the name of a shrine in Nagano which is tied into the legend about Amaterasu hiding herself and bringing darkness to the world. Also involves some of the deities that the judges have named themselves after.]

If more than half the votes tallied over a several-week interval were “guilty”, the target was recorded for eternity on the site’s “List of Sinners”. According to the jurors, it was called the “Hall of Fame”.

The people who were chosen for judgment were of all types. There was a wide range, from important politicians and performers I would only ever lay eyes on on television, to the more familiar presences of teachers and students within the schools of Yagokoro Prefecture.

The “Five Togakushi Judges” were five people whose ages and genders, as well as everything else, was kept secret, and the only thing known about the members was their usernames. The five were Omoikane, Uzume, Sarutahiko, Tajikarao, and Futodama.

[Omoikane, Ame no Uzume no Mikoto, Sarutahiko, Ame no Tajikarao, and Futodama are all Japanese deities.]

I tried accessing the police database, thinking that

the police would have marked them for their extreme ideology, but they did not appear as persons of interest. There were people among the members who knew much about the Internet, so the Tokyo police's "Anti-Cyber Crime Team" was at a loss for what to do with them.

Just like that, it seemed they had the cunning to lead the police around by the nose, which expedited their popularity, and the "Five Togakushi Judges" of the site were regaled as heroes.

And the hallmark of the "Midnight Site" was that the people who entered the "List of Sinners", called the "Hall of Fame", had a high mortality rate. For the performers. For the high-ranking politicians. For the schoolteachers. For Kaoru Hioka. Whether it was coincidence or inevitability was unclear, but many humans on the "List of Sinners" no longer existed in this world.

Knowing as much as I did about the "Midnight Site", it gave off a loathsome feeling. It was not just the

close resemblance in name to the “Midnight Channel”, but that its existence could be said to have a similarly suspicious subject matter.

“–Oh, you’re really getting into it.”

A voice came from behind me. On the black background of the screen, Touko-san’s reflection appeared standing in the doorway.

“I thought I’d drink some coffee. How about it, Naoto? If you want, I’ll make some for you while I’m at it?”

“…Thank you very much.”

I turned the chair and looked at Touko-san.

“How was it? Working with Sousei-san?”

Touko-san asked as she poured black liquid from the coffee maker into the cups.

“Very tiring.”

“Right?” Touko-san snorted and laughed. “Sousei’s an adult if you look at him, but inside he’s a

complete kid. It's been a long time since he first came into this world, but he's actually only been operating these last few years. Think of him as a small child and overlook his cheekiness."

Touko-san scrutinized me with brilliant eyes.

"You know a lot about him, don't you?"

I had no ulterior motive. I was simply asking an innocent question.

"...Yes, well, I'm also a Persona user and I've had ties to the Kirijo Group since I was young, so it's through that relationship that I've known about Sousei ever since he was born."

"...I see."

However, from Touko-san's clouded gaze, which showed weakness for just a moment, I knew that I had asked the forbidden, and though I was interested, I refrained from asking further questions.

"Oh yeah, Naoto. If you intend to stay here longer,

use the shower inside. It's a shower exclusively for the research guys, but you don't need to hold back."

"That's a little..." I was bewildered, so Touko-san calmly said to me: "Don't worry. It's really just like a private shower room.

"Are you worried about changing clothes? In that case, I'll lend you my spare shirt?"

As I took the mug that Touko-san proffered with a "Here," I gave a vague answer: "Haa..." That wasn't the problem.

The sound of static came from the speaker. Next, a whole-building broadcast telling of a developing incident rang out across the floor.

"Incoming call from the Tokyo police. A violent incident has occurred within the jurisdiction of the Yagokoro police station, on a road of the pleasure quarter behind the train station. As this occurred within the jurisdiction, the policemen on patrol near the scene are to immediately–"

Touko-san downed her coffee in one gulp, and no sooner had the broadcast finished than she stood up from the sofa.

“There’s a nap room here too. If it gets late, you might as well stay at the station!”

Leaving behind those rapid words, she bravely left the director’s office. As I drank the lukewarm coffee, I gazed fixedly at Touko-san’s disappearing back. “… I wonder where she hides that much vitality in that slim body.”

In truth, she was a strong-willed person. With a woman’s body, Touko-san may have had to become as bold as she was in every way so that she could keep up with burly male policemen and stand up to the worst criminals without faltering. I, who consented in a way unlike me, gave in and ended up following Touko-san’s suggestion.

I was opposed to becoming exposed in an unfamiliar place. Because it was within the police station rather than a hotel, I was all the more reluctant. Even so,

the feeling that I wanted to follow Touko-san's example and become an imperturbable, strong-willed woman stirred within me. It was also true that I felt I wanted to wash away my sweat and fatigue.

Even so, at my first look at the shower room, I immediately became perturbed.

It was a small shower room that brought to mind a telephone box. That was not a particular issue. The entire surface was made of glass, though it was frosted glass. This was also in no way unbearable. However, as could be expected, I could not face the situation unflinchingly.

When I looked around for a changing room, there were only a partition left in the shape of the character ⊐ and a single basket made of plastic. Inside the basket were a bath towel and a new white shirt.

"...It can't be, I'm supposed to change here?"

It matched with the two conditions from before, and

I was strongly intimidated. For a moment I wanted to turn back. What made me stop in my tracks were Touko-san's words: "I often use it."

What crossed my mind was the awe-inspiring form of Touko-san, courageously taking off and discarding her clothing and freely exposing her voluptuous body. I steeled myself, thinking that it came so naturally to Touko-san.

I looked around restlessly. There was not a single soul on the floor. There were only dim, glowing lights and the faint sound of every kind of machine operating. The inhuman silence reminded me of a hospital in the middle of the night.

I cleared my throat a little, took off my clothes one by one, folded them, and placed them in the basket. Why was it? A feeling of immorality was seething in my chest, as if I was doing something I was not supposed to.

I, who had become exposed, fled to the shower room with the vigor of a spy hiding under cover when in

danger of being detected by security guards. Immediately I turned the tap. My whole body was gently covered in warm water. The temperature was perfect for my body, flushed with shame.

My tension dissolved and I started to relax several minutes after I began to shower. It was only natural that Touko-san's way of behaving, calmly and with self-awareness, was something she could do because of who she was. I, whose eyes had been opened in various ways, decided to go back to doing my best with investigating, and as I did not want to intrude upon the nap room, I swore to return to the dormitory before the date changed.

–There was no use crying over spilt milk. It seemed I should not have relaxed and let down my guard. I had let my mind wander completely. I hadn't thought anyone would enter the director's office.

It was exactly at the moment when I picked up my bra from the basket. A piercing noise resounded. It was the sound of the door to the director's office

being thrown open.

“Oiiii! Naoto! You’re here, right? I need to talk to you! It’s about what we talked about at school!”

A familiar voice reached to where I was.

“Naoto? You’re not here? Weird. That Gramps, was he lying to me… No, but the lights are on–”

The voice was unmistakably Sousei-san’s. My breath caught immediately. Furthermore, I was crouched and curled up like a turtle, tightly grasping my bra. My heart, mad with impatience, was beating violently within my chest.

“…W-why is Sousei-san, didn’t he go shopping…”

My confusion was brief; more than several hours had passed since we had parted, so I realized with a feeling of despair that he must have already finished shopping. I thought that I had to hide my body as soon as possible, and I vigorously stretched out my hand to the bath towel in the basket. I was panicked, but it was no use. A noisy sound echoed inside the room.

I lost my balance and pitched forward and collapsed, and the partition in front of my eyes fell over onto the floor. Of all things to happen, the white bra I had been clutching fluttered through the air like a seagull.

“Hey! You were here!”

The sound of footsteps from long strides came closer.

“Answer me–––––––huh…?”

In that instant, Sousei-san saw me lying on my face on the floor, having lost my strength like a fish that had washed up on shore, and he scrutinized me suspiciously. However, when his gaze stopped on the bra spread out at my feet, he did a complete turnaround and his eyes grew round.

“Y-you… Naoto… this underwear…”

As he picked up the bra from the floor with his fingertips, he let out in a surprised voice.

“Um, that is…”

I averted my gaze, and, panicking, covered my breasts, which were pressed against the floor, with both arms. It was only natural that he be surprised.

"...No way... Naoto... You had this kind of hobby! What a perverted bastard!"

"That's not it! I'm a woman!"

I shouted without thinking.

"...Huh? It's not that you're a perverted bastard who secretly loves women's underwear?"

"O-of course not! Are you an idiot?"

"Who's an idiot, you bastard! Then if you're not a perverted bastard, show me some proof!"

"I am a genuine woman!"

With both arms still hiding my chest, I gave in to my anger and rose to my feet. I stole my bra from Sousei-san with one hand and promptly turned my back on him. I could feel a piercing gaze on my back.

"...Hm. You do have the figure of a woman. Then

why were you going around as a guy?"

"...I'll explain! I'll explain it to you properly later! I'm getting dressed, so please look over there!"

"I told you, even if my great self sees a human woman's naked body, I don't feel anything from it."

"I'm telling you I don't like it!"

I turned only my neck to look back at Sousei-san and glared.

"Don't yell! Or glare at me! Or pout!"

While complaining on and on, Sousei-san obediently turned his back.

I quickly got dressed. In my hurry, I was not able to put on my pants neatly. My hair was still wet, but that could not be helped. Somehow, through a combination of various factors, I was so miserable I could cry.

I straightened my posture, took repeated deep breaths, and calmed my heart before I opened my mouth.

"...The reason is simple. It's because, as far as being a detective goes, being recognized as a man by the people around me is somewhat more convenient."

"But you know. Touko is a woman, but she runs those guys she works with into the ground, doesn't she?"

"That's... Compared to Touko-san, I am still very much a child. As a child and a woman, and moreover, one who possesses a small build, disguising myself as a man was a plan born of desperation that I formulated so that the adults around me in crime scene investigations would not make light of me."

"...Huuh, so you're saying it's pretty rough looking like a young detective."

As he stroked his chin with his fingertips, Sousei-san repeatedly looked me up and down from head to toe.

"...Touko-san knows that I am a girl. It was probably just an oversight that she did not tell you. But if you're upset about it, I apologize..."

I dropped my gaze.

“Doesn’t really matter to me!”

Sousei-san laughed scornfully.

“Well, that’s because whether you’re a guy or a girl, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re Naoto Shirogane.”

I raised my face and gazed at the person before me. Sousei-san was acting indifferent.

“I mean, I was surprised, but if you’re a big man like me, you shouldn’t let every little thing bother you.”

I wondered who exactly was speaking to me right now, but right now I did not go so far as to say anything.

“So? I’m pretty tolerant, aren’t I? It’s okay to revere me, you know?”

I thought, “Who would do anything like revere you?”, but I was smiling. I was in a good mood.

I felt happier than expected at what Sousei-san had

just said. I thought that Sousei-san's words may have come from his heart, as a robot who was also a minority in society, and his blunt speech resounded all the more in my heart.

"By the way, Sousei-san. Did you need something from me?"

I, who had completely regained my composure, remembered that Sousei-san had yelled something to that effect as soon as he entered the director's office.

"Yeah! It hit me. The name you mentioned on the school rooftop this evening."

"Please explain." I nodded.

"I don't know the girl who died either. Just that I remembered I recently heard about a man with the same surname 'Hioka'. If I remember right, his name was – Kyouhei Hioka. He's a detective. They were saying he's a member of the Ashihara police in the next jurisdiction over."

"...Their family name is the same. I see. He may have a connection to the late Kaoru Hioka. Tomorrow, we should go pay a visit to this Kyouhei Hioka-san as soon as possible."

"No, that's impossible."

Sousei-san shook his head from side to side.

"Looks like that detective Kyouhei Hioka is currently 'missing'."

"...Missing? Why?"

Sousei-san snorted at me, who was doubtful.

"How should I know? I just coincidentally remembered that that old man Tsuge and Touko were saying something about it a couple weeks ago. I came to the station just to tell you this, so you should grovel on the ground in thanks!"

I ran to the computer and fell into the chair like I was sliding into home plate. I gripped the mouse and clicked once, then twice. When I finally reached the screen that was my goal, I quickly hit the keyboard.

“Oi! Don’t ignore me!”

On the screen which I was staring at as if to bore holes in it, the police database was shown. A summary of the “Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case” was written there.

I quickly scanned through Kyouhei Hioka’s personal data. Member of the Ashihara police department. Assistant Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Bureau. Age, thirty-five years. Height, 172 centimeters. Weight, 65 kilograms.

He had a history of winning multiple awards, including the bureau director’s award, the section head’s award, and so forth. He performed excellently in emergency situations. He had such youthful looks that one would definitely not believe him to be over thirty, and the line of his body was as slender as if he were in his teens. However, it was very clear that an agile, alert body was hidden beneath his suit. In all, he kept a neat personal appearance, and his refreshing smile also gave the

impression of an agreeable young man.

Continuing on, my gaze suddenly halted on the field describing family composition.

“Lives alone. *Younger sister living with him, Kaoru Hioka, died in an accident half a year ago.”

“…They’re connected.” I felt the points coming together to form a line.

“Figured something out?” Sousei-san peered over my shoulder at the screen.

“This.” I pointed at the field on Kyouhei Hioka’s family composition, and, “Oh, his little sister! So they really were related! I’m really on the ball here!” Sousei-san sang his own praises.

“It looks like it’s not just a disappearance. It seems Assistant Inspector Kyouhei Hioka possesses a handgun, stole time bombs confiscated during the bomb mania arrests a while ago, and has concealed his whereabouts.”

What Kyouhei Hioka was carrying was a Sig Sauer

P230. It was a semi-automatic Swiss model officially adopted by the Japanese police. It held eight rounds. It was a .32 caliber rapid-fire double action gun. It did not have much lethality, but the recoil was light, and its precision and accuracy were high.

As for the time bombs, there wasn't a detailed description, but it seemed they were things remodeled from guitar amps that made use of special wiring and could not be identified as bombs at first glance.

"It's been approximately two weeks since he disappeared. He may have become involved in a case, or there may have been another reason… They're in the middle of an investigation, so I can't be sure, but most likely the other case that Touko-san said she is busy with is the 'Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case', right?"

The resolution of a scandal involving someone connected to the police would be of the utmost priority to them. I surmised that there was a strong

sense of crisis in the nearby area from the fact that they called in even the detectives of the Yagokoro police station belonging to a different jurisdiction. There was no doubt that the request that I, an outsider, take the "Yagokoro High School student disappearance case" was also related to these circumstances.

In addition, it was highly interesting that Touko Aoi's name was written among the members taking command of the unit investigating the "Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case".

"...Hey, Naoto."

Sousei-san stood with his arms crossed and scowled at the screen.

"The big brother who's got a handgun and bombs and is hiding his whereabouts, Kyouhei Hioka, and the little sister who died in a train accident half a year ago, Kaoru Hioka... Somehow, doesn't it feel really suspicious to you?"

"Yes. It feels like a case."

In my mind, the seven letters of the word “revenge” were dancing.

Suddenly, my cell phone’s ringtone resounded. On the screen was the name “Touko Aoi”. It could be said to be good timing, since I wanted to ask about Kyouhei Hioka. “This is Naoto.” I picked up the phone cheerfully.

However, I did not continue with my words. That was because Touko-san informed me in a heavy voice.

“In Iwato Apartments, on the outskirts of Yagokoro – we’ve discovered the remains of the girl known as ‘Miyuki Midorikawa’.”

April 1 Yagokoro Suburbs Iwato Apartments

After the phone call from Touko-san, I rode atop Sousei-san, who had transformed into a bike, to the apartment building where Miyuki Midorikawa’s body had been found.

It took twenty minutes to reach the suburbs from

the station. We left the back roads where the foliage grew thickly and ran at full speed along the country roads, and our destination was built fruitlessly in the middle of an empty lot scattered sparsely with private houses.

It may have been because there was no artificial light in the surroundings. The stars shone dazzlingly bright in the night sky, and the large, round moon was so pale it was unsettling.

An abandoned building – that was my first impression of Iwato Apartments.

It was an apartment building with five floors, deserted with no sign of being lived in, and it seemed there was no electricity and no outside lighting. If it weren't for the headlights of the police vehicles and the balloon lights of the on-site investigators, it would have been completely dark.

I proceeded by taking careful steps among the freely growing weeds, and we silently faced the eroded concrete outer walls and exposed, rusted iron bars

peeking through here and there. The entire building was eerie and could only be likened to a giant corpse.

This was something I heard from the young uniformed policeman near the entrance to the scene, but it seemed the reason for the destruction in the neighborhood of the Iwato Apartments was because of a setback in the plans to construct a new town. It seemed that, as a result of the bankruptcy of the big construction company that had been endorsing and pushing the plan forward, Iwato Apartments had been left halfway demolished for a long time.

This place was relatively well-known among the Yagokoro townspeople as a “test of courage spot”, and when summer came around, it seemed a fair number of young people came here. Right now it was out of season, but in the end the first to find the body of “Miyuki Midorikawa” was a couple that had come for the test of courage rather than an investigation.

Touko-san was absent. That was because the Yagokoro police had been called out for the incident in the pleasure district behind the Yagokoro train station.

Just as Touko-san had said before, when I gave her name: “Oh, from Yagokoro. I heard about you,” and the detective from the Ashihara police led me to the place where the body had been found.

The body had been found inside the first floor entrance. At the place of its discovery, a forensics investigation had already begun, and they strongly emphasized, “Don’t disturb the scene.”

It was not my first time at the scene of a murder. However, when there was a corpse in front of me, words still failed me. At most, I was a detective. It was not my intention to be able to protect everything in the world. Be that as it may, I was a detective. Even so, I would not say that I wasn’t tormented by my powerlessness, wondering if there was no way I could have protected her.

When I asked the nearest young, male detective, it seemed from the type of clothing, the type of body, and the personal belongings that there was no doubt the corpse was that of "Miyuki Midorikawa".

It seemed she had been dead for nearly two weeks. The cause of death was blood loss from a bullet wound from a handgun. She had been shot a total of eight times. One particular shot to the neck had been the fatal wound. The shadows around the body were the traces of the pool of blood. During those two weeks, the blood had dried, dyed the concrete, and changed to black dust.

"...So that's how it was."

At the words "for two weeks", I procured one piece of supporting evidence. The truth was that the period in which Kyouhei Hioka went missing, the period in which Miyuki Midorikawa went missing, and the body's time of death were all incidents that had occurred about two weeks ago, and that could not be simple coincidence.

“Do you know the type of handgun that was used?”

I asked that quietly, and the expressions of the head forensics investigator and the nearby detectives all clouded simultaneously. That was a clear answer.

“It was a Sig Sauer P230, wasn’t it?”

“…Yeah.” An aged detective nodded gloomily.

From the circumstantial evidence, the scene was filled with the atmosphere of “The suspect may have been Kyouhei Hioka.”

In my mind’s eye appeared Kyouhei Hioka’s charming smile, childlike for his age, that I had seen just before coming to the scene. I could easily imagine that the adoration his colleagues felt for him went beyond just a senpai-kouhai relationship.

“We can’t know yet without checking the rifling marks. It’s not like it’s absolutely sure that ‘Kyouhei’ did it…”

The aged detective immediately denied, but his words were weak. It was a shame, but my reasoning

was slowly becoming more likely.

“Would any of you happen to know the reason for Kyouhei Hioka’s disappearance?”

I posed a question that went even further, and:

“Sorry, Detective Prince. That incident is our problem. An outsider should refrain from sticking their neck into it any further.”

I was strongly refused. “…Please excuse me.” I bowed to the people around me and headed for Sousei-san, who was loitering near the wall, looking bored.

“That was over pretty fast, wasn’t it?”

“I understand how they feel.”

I wondered if it was because they had this so-called police dignity. It may also have been their frustration regarding one of their colleagues.

“It’s annoying just to look at. From where I stand, those ‘bonds’ humans have are a pain.”

“They aren’t my strong point either. I simply understand that society is an aggregation of people, and I also know that humans can by no means live alone.”

The connections between people were sometimes troublesome and it was much more comfortable to be alone. However, I knew through experience that things that were impossible alone became possible if one could join hands with someone.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say,” Sousei-san said in a teasing tone, and, “You know too, don’t you, Sousei-san? With my Persona, you were able to do things you couldn’t manage alone,” I answered with a wry smile.

“Speaking of which, it’s our turn. There is undoubtedly treasure sleeping in this place.”

“Treasure, huh. That treasure’s gotta be rusted iron. I like it better sparkling, you know?”

“For that reason. When we’ve solved everything about the case, the dazzling treasure of truth will be

in our hands."

"Fine. Feels like I'm being tricked, but it's not like I've got any other choice, so I'll go along with you."

That I deliberately cracked jokes was because I could not help but feel that we were about to do an unsavory deed, similar to digging up a grave.

"Okay. Let's try it out. Naoto, power up my Tsukuyomi well."

"That goes without saying."

However, I knew very well that this was something only we could do. We removed ourselves to the shadow of a pillar several meters away from crime scene investigators so that our Personas would not be seen.

In that way, at the murder scene – we came to detect the conversation Miyuki Midorikawa had in the moments just before her death.

"...Haa... Haa... P-please... I won't run away anymore, so... I'll tell you... The things I was hiding... I'll tell you

everything, so... Please... D-don't shoot me... Please..."

"...Just like you said, I'm... "Uzume"... Kaoru Hioka... san... The one who wrote those things on the Midnight Site about her was also me..."

"B-but, I didn't think she would die! That girl... K-Kaoru-san was... She was getting along well with Shirou, and I absolutely couldn't forgive that... So I thought, I would her a hard time, a little... I didn't really mean it... So I put a bunch of half-truths..."

"I-It's not my fault! That's right! I only wrote those things! After that I only watched! They were manipulated by lies! The ones who drove her into a corner! That was everyone else!"

"H-hey! I talked, right! Put that down! Are you listening to me? Say something! Why me! Why do you have to make me suffer! It's the Midnight Site's fault that girl died! And anyway she was hit by a train! She shouldn't have just gone and fallen from the platform! You reap what you sow! Ah-------"

"–Well, that's all," Sousei-san gazed at the electric

marquee on which the words had paused and muttered.

A deep sigh escaped me. The situation at that time had been picked up and conveyed through the sense of realism in the lines left behind. It weighed heavily in my heart.

My eyelids fell closed and I leaned my back against the concrete wall. From the contents of the conversation, I could put the events in order.

Miyuki Midorikawa had been running from someone. The mysterious person possessed a gun and had cornered her in the entrance hall. In the end, eight bullets had been fired at her.

“So, was there some valuable treasure buried in there?”

“...Yes. The tip of a crown is poking out of the earth.”

I was quietly excited that we had found a clue to the disappearance case.

“From the handgun that was used and the number

of shots in the body, and the circumstantial evidence of two weeks having passed since death, along with Miyuki Midorikawa's past conversation, the one who killed her – there is a high probability that it was the one who disappeared those two weeks ago, Kyouhei Hioka."

After stroking his chin once, Sousei-san muttered.

"…I see, hm – so that's how it is. The next important thing becomes Kyouhei Hioka's motive for murdering Miyuki Midorikawa, right?"

"Of course, the answer as to his motive is recorded in the past conversation."

Sousei-san stared into my eyes suspiciously. "Then let's review the past conversation once again." I had Sousei-san return the past conversation to the beginning and began to clarify.

"To avoid confusion, we'll put aside the latter half of the conversation, but we can deduce from the first half that the other was her social superior, because Miyuki Midorikawa put in great effort to use a more

polite speech style. In addition, the fact that Miyuki Midorikawa panicked when it came to Kaoru Hioka and added 'san' to her name also becomes a crucial factor."

The part where she had started by saying "that girl" and corrected it to "Kaoru-san" carried the same kind of meaning.

"In other words, wouldn't that be because the person who possessed the gun was – a close relative of Kaoru Hioka?"

"...You mean Kyouhei Hioka?"

"Yes. Kyouhei Hioka's greatest motive to murder Miyuki Midorikawa was his younger sister, Kaoru Hioka."

My gaze naturally drifted to where the police and inspectors were investigating the scene. The conclusion I had derived was cruel when I considered their feelings.

"I think this is 'Kyouhei Hioka's revenge tragedy'."

From his appearance in the photo, I could not see him as a person who would do this coldhearted deed, but from the circumstances, I could only think that this was Kyouhei Hioka's crime.

"...Hoh. So you're saying that Kyouhei Hioka taking a handgun and time bombs and disappearing, it was all so he could kill Miyuki Midorikawa?"

"To put it bluntly."

I nodded slightly.

"Now, please remember one thing from Kaoru Hioka's lingering conversation on the school rooftop. She was worried about slander on the Internet, wasn't she? At that time, the 'Midnight Site' she mentioned was already the main culprit dragging her down to Hell."

"...Midnight Site?"

I explained the matter of the Midnight Site that I had investigated on the computer at the station to Sousei-san.

"...Huh? What's that about? I mean, those Togakushi and those guys who use the site, are they okay in the head?"

Sousei-san spat out as if amazed.

"So that gloomy site is popular on the Internet... You humans' society is focused on death. Is it the stress? It's the stress, right? You know, it's better if you guys lived by being more carefree."

I allowed myself a wry smile. I didn't dare say, "It would be better if you lived by fussing a bit more, Sousei-san." The world was not as simple as Sousei-san thought, but I also believed people should be able to live as he said.

"In any case, the name of the Midnight Site also appeared in Miyuki Midorikawa's past conversation. And also, that name 'Uzume'. That name is consistent with of one of the members of the 'Five Togakushi Judges'."

From the past conversation, it became clear that Miyuki Midorikawa was one of the members whose

age and gender and everything else was unknown. It could be said that this was a groundbreaking development.

“Miyuki Midorikawa’s past conversation also verified that the slander concerning Kaoru Hioka consisted of ‘unfounded rumors’.”

“What kind of slander was it exactly?”

Kaoru Hioka’s type of sin, her supposed relationships with men, was written on the Midnight Site. If one swallowed what had been written, Kaoru Hioka was made out to be an extraordinarily “delinquent and degenerate woman”.

“…I’m reluctant to say it. If you would like to know the details, please take a quick look at the Midnight Site yourself. But do so at your own risk.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it of the depressing memories I had suddenly recalled.

“From seeing your reaction, Naoto, it looks like I’d

be better off not knowing." Sousei-san gave a snort of laughter.

"A wise decision."

I ducked my head just once, recovered my composure, and continued.

"Here is a rough chronological sketch of what happened concerning Kaoru Hioka's death. Kaoru Hioka was exposed to unfounded slander, both on the Internet and at school. The cause was that her name had appeared on the 'Midnight Site'. Finally, she died in a train accident."

As he stroked his chin with his fingertips, Sousei-san nodded repeatedly, as if he was digesting the information.

"In truth, it's uncertain whether it was an accident or suicide, but it's undeniable that Kaoru Hioka was emotionally driven into a corner by the slander that originated on the 'Midnight Site'."

"So you mean because Kyouhei Hioka knows the

truth, he's carrying out a revenge tragedy?"

"...Yes. What you should take notice of is the number, 'eight times', that the victim was shot. It's true that the Sig Sauer P230 has low lethality, but as you can imagine, there would have been no need for eight shots. Eight shots is the same as the Sig Sauer P230's maximum number of rounds..."

The coldhearted scene played in my mind of Kyouhei Hioka silently and repeatedly pulling the trigger of the handgun aimed at Miyuki Midorikawa, who was groveling on the floor, until it reached its limit.

Most likely, even after the handgun had discharged eight shots and become empty, he had continued to pull the trigger obsessively. That man who had appeared good, Kyouhei Hioka, had gone that far. I could only think he had a deep grudge against his opponent.

"–Kyouhei Hioka reached the 'Midnight Site' that had driven his younger sister to die, and finally

detained the perpetrator, Miyuki Midorikawa, and exacted his revenge on her."

Sousei-san showed a complicated expression.

"...Even so, why is Kyouhei Hioka's revenge tragedy now, when half a year's passed since his sister Kaoru Hioka died? I kind of feel like that's a pretty long gap there?"

"Even if there's another side to the story, it's an investigation he himself was conducting, so I believe timing and patience must have been necessary. Furthermore, he may have been stupefied by the shock of losing his sister..."

In cases I had come across as a detective, I had up until now come to see countless relatives of victims experience a great, crippling despondency at the loss of everyday life.

"In addition, I think 'the peculiarities of net crimes' also exist."

"...Peculiarities, huh. You mean how you don't know

who wrote anything on the Internet because of widespread anonymity?"

"No. The ability to at least confirm the person who wrote it is has long been trivial for the police. When you compare the anti-cyber crime countermeasures of each prefecture's police, led by the Toyko police, to how they were long ago, a surprising amount of progress has been made. Sousei-san, It's likely that you have also seen incidents on the news involving the confirmation and apprehension of people who wrote advance notices of murder on anonymous bulletin boards with countless numbers of users."

"...That's true. Then what was the problem?"

"A problem of time. It's different from people in town clamoring about someone killing someone else. Since the crime used the Internet as an intermediary, apprehending the criminal takes time no matter how you look at it. That would be the case even if he's already established proof of the crime."

More than a technical problem or anything else, the

legal process would from then on be handled as a type of cyber crime.

“Naturally, the police have also marked the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’ as a dangerous group. However, they are not aware of the particulars of the people involved.”

“Oi oi, Naoto. Isn’t that a bit off-topic? Weren’t you just saying a second ago that ‘The ability to at least confirm the person who wrote it is has long been trivial for the police’?”

“Yes. I did say that. However, that is if the other is ‘a normal opponent’. Somehow it seems that a brilliant hacker is among the members of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’, and even using the Tokyo police’s Anti-Cyber Crime Team, it seems they’re being pressured and fighting a difficult battle.”

Internationally, countries had openly declared war against individual skilled hackers and groups of hackers, who at present were hijacking corporate webpages, and were not suppressing the traces of

cyber-terrorism. However, the situation was such that they could not control those thought of as hackers.

“What’s that about. It’s a miracle that Kyouhei Hioka managed to reach Miyuki Midorikawa with his own investigation without having special techniques like the Anti-Cyber Crime Team or special abilities like us… No, you could call it tenacity.”

“…Tenacity, huh. Well, there’s no way for us to know.”

Sousei-san muttered as he looked up at the heavens full of stars. It was a surprising reaction. I had thought he would simply dismiss it as worthless.

“Let’s be clear on what we’ll need to do starting tomorrow. First is a continuation of today’s work. Let’s put all our power into exhaustively going over the school, which we left unfinished, and detecting the past conversations. That’s because Miyuki Midorikawa’s past conversations will ‘definitely’ be there.”

Miyuki Midorikawa's death was unfortunate, but with Sousei-san's Persona, we would be able to shed some light on her past conversations that we could detect.

"Do we just leave aside Kyouhei Hioka? Since we're going after the disappearance case, he's someone we really can't ignore, right?"

"It's true that we can't ignore him; Kyouhei Hioka is an important person, though we're putting him aside in our investigation for now."

The connection between Kyouhei Hioka and Miyuki Midorikawa had been verified. We would have to consider the relation with the other person who had disappeared, Shirou Konno.

"First of all, let's prioritize the things that only we can do. The search for Kyouhei Hioka is their and Touko-san's area."

I looked on from afar as the detectives continued their investigation of the crime scene. From the behavior of the detective colleagues earlier, it would

be better for us outsiders to restrain ourselves. It was just that I wanted to know in more detail about Kyouhei Hioka's temperament.

"Kyouhei Hioka hasn't been caught even though that Touko's chasing after him, so he's gotta be pretty good. I'm not being sarcastic, I really mean it."

I felt the same way as Sousei-san. I also knew Touko-san's capability well.

"It's because Kyouhei Hioka is also a detective. It may be that he has the experience and skills to evade a net. He could be called a formidable opponent just from his knowledge of the internal affairs of the police."

"Kyouhei Hioka wants to not get caught that much? He killed Miyuki Midorikawa and carried out his little sister's revenge without any problems. Even though he would save us some time if he was satisfied and just let himself get caught by the police's rope."

Sousei-san commented in an unimpressed manner as he stared at the moon in the night sky with an unfocused gaze.

"...That is unlikely." I shook my head immediately. "There must be a reason that he will not let himself be caught."

"...Like what?"

"I think – it's because Kyouhei Hioka's revenge tragedy has only just begun."

Sousei-san looked at me with round eyes.

"Right before he killed Miyuki Midorikawa, there was a turbulent moment when he received a confession from her that she was 'Uzume', one of the members of the 'Five Togakushi Judges'. That Kyouhei Hioka still continues to flee may be because he intends to exact revenge on all five members of the 'Five Togakushi Judges'."

It was suffocating to imagine that the feelings of Kyouhei Hioka, a policeman, went so far that he was

able to commit murder. Repentance, hatred, despair: whichever it was, there was clearly a dreadful resolve in Kyouhei Hioka's actions.

"So? Is Kyouhei Hioka figuring out anyone who's left from the other four of the 'Five Togakushi Judges'?"

"...I don't know that much. I simply think that Kyouhei Hioka has managed to get closer to the 'Five Togakushi Judges' than the police or us."

"This has turned into a pretty gruesome story. Whether the police can catch him first or Kyouhei Hioka shoots and kills the other four first: this is really a survival game!"

The crime scene investigators turned cold eyes on Sousei-san, whose laughter was echoing in the entrance.

"You're being indiscreet, Sousei-san."

In an instant, I pulled Sousei-san's clothing with my fingertips and gave a small bow to the faraway investigators.

“Huh? You’re saying I shouldn’t laugh here? Even if the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’ that’re being targeted all die without a single one left, I think they deserve it. I’m cheering on Kyouhei Hioka, you know?”

“That way of thinking is mistaken.”

I objected in a strong tone.

“Geez, I don’t get you! I’m asking you! Can you say that even when he’s after bastards who aren’t worth saving?”

I squarely met Sousei-san’s strong-willed gaze as he scowled.

“That’s a foolish question.”

I did not hesitate.

“What we should do is dispel the mysteries and expose the truth of the case. It is not our place to judge the assailant.”

Of course, if in the end I could be able to be of use to many people and save people’s lives, there would be nothing that would make me happier.

“I really don’t get you at all. It being our place or our duty, that stuff’s too complicated. I don’t understand the structure of human society. It’s ‘cause I’m a ‘robot’!”

I was taken aback by the word “robot” which flew out of Sousei-san’s mouth.

Yes, he was not human. I remembered that. Since the first time I had met and confronted the existence known as Sousei Kurogami, I had intentionally made an effort not to classify him as a robot or as a person.

As for the reason, it was because my current self could not possibly derive a precise answer for the “definition of a human”.

I, who thought that it was inefficient to devote time to things I did not understand, had immediately given up pursuing what he was. I needed to concentrate everything on the case in front of me and had come to the decision that his issue would be settled with time. I had lost sight of the fact that

Sousei Kurogami, who expressed plenty of emotion and used words skillfully along with having a terribly humanlike personality, was a robot.

I gazed at Sousei-san. For what reason was he born, what kind of moments had he gone through, with what goal did he live? In addition, the significance of his Persona he held…

"…What? Got any complaints?"

"…Ah, no."

I shook my head. Once again, I had begun to feel anxious about the existence called Sousei Kurogami.

"…Don't worry and let's cooperate on the case investigation. I'm saying don't care what I think. Anyway, once you and I wrap up this case, that's the end of our relationship."

"…Haa." I gave a half-hearted reply.

As to why, he had the same brazen demeanor as always, but Sousei-san's gaze seemed lonely as he looked up at the starry sky.

Chapter 4: Flow

April 2 Yagokoro High School

The next morning, I rode Sousei-san as a bike, not to the main gate, but around to the back gate, where there were few students. “Behave yourself until afternoon,” I instructed Sousei-san more severely than yesterday, and parted with him.

“You’re annoying. Touko and Ai are too but you’re even more annoying than them. You’re just like ‘Yuuri’…”

A name I was not used to hearing had slipped from Sousei-san’s mouth. “…Yuuri?” I repeated, and Sousei-san immediately averted his gaze.

“I-it’s nothing! Don’t ask! Hurry and go! You’ll be late to class!”

Sousei-san rudely talked on and on as if he were chasing away a stray dog. His expression was severe.

I was concerned by Sousei-san's strange behavior. However, it was true that I would be late for class, so I said, "I'll contact you this afternoon," and hurriedly headed to the classroom.

At the same moment in which I took my seat, my cell phone's mail tone rang. There was still a little time before homeroom, so I checked the contents of the mail. The contents naturally made me smile broadly.

"Naoto! How you doing? You're not being bullied at your new school, are you? Tell me if anything happens! You don't need to hold back! I'll get over to you right away! Anyway, I'll shove those rude guys down and tie 'em together!"

"...That's just like Tatsumi-kun."

In the name field were the characters for "Kanji Tatsumi". I immediately typed out a reply mail: "It's all right. I'm doing well." However, right before hitting the "reply" button, I stopped my thumb. I thought it really was a wearisome answer.

After thinking for several seconds, I added, "… However, if anything is troubling me, I'll be counting on you, Tatsumi-kun," and replied.

Tatsumi-kun was a good friend for worrying about me like this.

Whether it was Kujikawa-san or Tatsumi-kun, even if they were far away, just remembering their faces gradually filled my heart with warmth. Just the thought that everyone was doing their best made me feel that I could also give it my all. My current self, who had friends that I could rely on, was very happy.

And sure enough – I wondered if Kaoru Hioka and Miyuki Midorikawa had had friends that they could rely on.

For example, friends who, with just the words "help me", would come running at the drop of a hat, no matter how far away they were. If they had had friends like that, we might have been facing a different conclusion than we were now. I could not

stop thinking about it.

Was it unavoidable? Reality, which did not allow for any chance at takebacks, harbored a bit of a nihilistic feel. However, I did not have the leisure to drown in sentimentality. There were four people remaining. I had to save them somehow. Also for Kyouhei Hioka's sake, so that he would not make any more mistakes.

"Good morning, Shirogane-kun," the girl next to me greeted me, smiling, as she sat in the chair next to mine.

So I would take action immediately.

"Do you have time during lunch? I must speak to you. If possible, I'd like it to be just the two of us."

"Eh?" the girl next to me let out as her greeting was met with that question, and her shoulders stiffened. However, her face soon reddened, and she muttered with downcast eyes, "...Yeah, that's fine. If you want, Shirogane-kun..

I could not help but feel that there was a huge misunderstanding, but I smiled at her.

“Thank you, ‘Takizawa-san’.”

April 2 Yagokoro High School Rooftop

Lunch break. Sending a backwards glance at the vigorous group of male students who were hurriedly competing as they rushed down the stairs to the school store on the first floor, and the lively female students accompanying them who were headed to the restroom, I determinedly ascended the staircases one by one. I opened the steel door and the figure of someone waiting was already on the roof. After confirming that no one else was around, I opened my mouth and spoke to the girl, who was fidgeting as if she could not relax.

“I want to hear about Kaoru Hioka-san.”

I got right to the point.

When I did, Takizawa-san’s face, which until then had been red with embarrassment, went pale in an

instant.

"...W-why me? I think there are a lot of people besides me who know a lot about Kaoru-chan...?"

She was in a state of considerable confusion, as if a switch had been flipped.

"You will do; no, it has to be you, Takizawa-san."

I said while gazing straight at Takizawa-san. I was convinced.

Yesterday afternoon, the name "Takizawa" was present in Kaoru Hioka's past conversation that we detected in this place.

When I investigated on the computer at the station, there was only one student at Yagokoro High School with the family name "Takizawa". Incidentally, she had been in the same class as Kaoru Hioka during their second year. I remembered that the girl in the seat next to mine had rapidly given her name as "Takizawa" on my first day here after transferring.

"Don't worry. I only want to hear what you have to

say."

I addressed Takizawa-san, who was disquieted, as if to persuade her.

"I-I… don't know anything… really…"

Takizawa-san's hair, tied into two pigtails, violently swung left and right. Her overly strong rejection was suspicious and could be interpreted as proof of a troubling darker side.

"No, you should know, Takizawa-san – because you often discussed Kaoru Hioka's worry about the slander with her on this rooftop."

Her shoulders jerked violently.

"You were the one who told Kaoru Hioka about the 'Midnight Site', weren't you?"

She was the one who had told me there was a Detective Prince fad on the Internet. She had also saved many of the images going around the Internet. Takizawa-san clearly knew much about the Internet.

Takizawa-san wore an uncertain expression. I waited patiently for her to open her mouth, and finally she nodded slightly. "…Yes.

"…I didn't… I – I didn't think it would t-turn out this way!"

Takizawa-san dropped roughly to her knees on the concrete. Then, just like that, she dissolved into tears.

"I – I didn't mean it… Kaoru-chan was beautiful, and good at studying and sports, and popular with the guys, and she had a lot of things I didn't… I thought it wasn't fair… B-but I didn't want her to die! Really! I just kind of wanted to see… I just wanted to see Kaoru-chan's face when she saw the slander and got a shock…"

Her voice echoed, gloomy and completely at odds with the cloudless blue sky.

"Ka-Kaoru-chan was my friend, my best friend… But I was still jealous… It was hard always being compared to her… I was envious… But that was all…

It wasn't like I was bitter or hated her… Writing a comment on the Midnight Site, I only did that once… It was spur of the moment…"

It was a speech as painful as coughing up blood. I stepped up to Takizawa-san and softly placed my hand on her back.

"…It's all right, calm down. I'm not blaming you. It was an accident that Kaoru Hioka-san died."

I lied. So that she would, for a short time, have temporary peace of mind. I could only think that the truth would be cruel.

She had regretted it enough. In addition, there was no need to make her suffer under the cruel truth. It may have been cheap sympathy. However, I could not bring myself to be more coldhearted.

"I can't trust anyone anymore! They say things that sound like they're worried but they don't get how I feel at all! I can't take this anymore! I'd rather they insult me to my face! Give me a break! Anyone around me could really be Uzume… I'm jumping at shadows… Even

you, Takizawa-san... Ah, sorry... Forget it... I'm sorry... I'm being weird...”

Remembering the contents of their conversation, most likely Kaoru Hioka had doubted her belief in Takizawa-san somewhere in her heart. She may have thought there was a chance that Takizawa-san was Uzume.

From the conversation, I could catch a glimpse of Kaoru Hioka's conflict, as she did not want to suspect her. At the same time, she was emotionally trapped, believing she could not trust anyone.

In truth, Uzume was Miyuki Midorikawa, but Kaoru Hioka, who was no longer in this world, would spend an eternity never knowing that. Another quite cruel truth was that Kaoru Hioka had died doubting Takizawa-san, thinking she might be Uzume, and I was unable to say anything more.

It was just a little malice. Envy, bitterness, resentment. Those were ordinary malices that everyone had as humans in their everyday lives.

I thought this as I gazed at Takizawa-san, trembling in knowledge of her sins.

It may have been that the "Midnight Site" bore a role similar to a place of accumulation for the malice lingering in the world. Like dirt that had accumulated and accumulated, the hundreds and thousands of small malices had finally become a huge ball of malice, and in the end it had gained a gloomy momentum that was enough to drive people to death.

I had nothing but disbelief that a negative place like the "Midnight Site" could be popular, but I felt that I could understand people's reasons for participating just a little.

Surely, in their daily lives, everyone experienced malice born from within them that they did not know how to handle and were searching for an outlet.

And when I realized that, the "Midnight Site" became more frightening than before. As to why,

the malice of each of the site's users separately was extremely small, and it could only be said that their awareness of their sins was nonexistent.

Once again, I became strongly determined to bring this case to a swift conclusion.

To sever the chain of unhappiness – that was undoubtedly the mission given to me who knew the truth, me who held the special power known as Persona.

April 2 Yagokoro High School Rooftop

After school.

"Shirogane! See you tomorrow!"

To the male students who were hurrying to their sports club activities and cutting it close, and:

"We were thinking of drinking tea at the Junes food court on the way back. Do you want to come, Prince?"

To the female students who invited me: "Sorry. There's something I need to do." I saw them off.

"...Shirogane? You're still in the classroom? Don't stay too late."

Receiving that warning from the homeroom teacher, I read a book to pass the time. At last, when I estimated that all people had trailed out of the school buildings over which the sun sank, I joined up with Sousei-san. On the designated place, the rooftop, I spoke to Sousei-san about the incident that had occurred at lunchtime.

I had obtained two pieces of important evidence from Takizawa-san when she regained her composure.

The first was that, regarding the person who told Kaoru Hioka's older brother Kyouhei Hioka about the "Midnight Site": "...I told him." The truth was that it had been Takizawa-san.

It seemed that Kyouhei Hioka had not believed from the very beginning that his sister's death was a simple accident and had come to her friend Takizawa-san's home to ask about the

circumstances.

As had been in the past conversation, Kaoru Hioka had told her brother Kyouhei Hioka absolutely nothing about her worries about the slander. Even so, Kyouhei Hioka had vaguely realized that his sister was troubled by something. However, he believed a girl his sister's age would only hate for her brother to meddle deeply in her affairs, and so he had not pursued the matter. "I really regret not pursuing it," Kyouhei Hioka had told Takizawa-san in a hoarse voice.

And then the other piece of evidence from Takizawa-san was that I now knew her conversation with Kyouhei Hioka was an incident that had taken place about two months after Kaoru Hioka's passing. In other words, Kyouhei Hioka had spent close to four months since learning of the existence of the "Midnight Site" until he reached Miyuki Midorikawa.

"–Got it."

When I had finished speaking, Sousei-san nodded, unimpressed.

“But geez, it’s hard to understand. If she didn’t want to be compared to other people, she should’ve just not hung out with anyone. If she did that, she would’ve been able to go without having grudges or being jealous.”

Sousei-san threw up his hands in an exaggerated action.

“Even if they know that, people cannot live alone. It may be that, if a person compares themselves to others, they’re constantly confirming who they themselves are.”

I thought that, in Takizawa-san’s case, because she was inferior to the one she was being compared to, it led to a negative result.

“That’s what’s hard for me to understand. I’m a robot, but even if I wasn’t, I would be able to puff out my chest and say I’m Sousei Kurogami, you know? And also, you’re sure you’re Naoto Shirogane even if

no one gives you proof, aren't you?"

In truth, it was a speech very like Sousei-san. When I thought about it, he said much the same thing when he learned I was a woman. However, that was something he could say because he was Sousei-san. Not everyone could puff out their chests and say they were constantly true to themselves.

"...Let's see. If I had to say, I wouldn't be confident."

I gave a self-deprecating smile.

"However, as a detective, I can be useful to someone – when I think that, I have a little bit of confidence that I am Naoto Shirogane. With that purpose, I can constantly, fully realize my existence in my interactions with people."

I did not deny it. For better or for worse, I knew that to live was to be able to accept that all sides of me were still me.

"Hmph! That doesn't help when you're depressed. If you ask me, when I thought about the good and bad

points, not knowing who you are is nothing compared to the inferiority complex you get from building up debts to other people."

I looked up at Sousei-san. I parted my lips slightly and asked:

"...But, isn't that lonely?"

There was no way that people could not know the loneliness of solitude once they had been touched by someone's warmth. I thought that perhaps Sousei-san had not had that kind of experience.

"There are also times when I regret it, thinking that it may have been better if I had not been influenced by others. However, I think the joy and reassurement that come from having friends I can trust and people important to me cannot be replaced. At the very least, it's a feeling that I would not have were I alone."

I thought it was an evasive, half-hearted rebuttal, but unexpectedly, Sousei-san mulled it over with a quiet expression.

"...Even I can understand that as a robot."

Finally Sousei-san let out his feelings little by little.

"What I wanna say is that there's no need to form crowds. You don't need that many. Just one is fine. If just that one person is there, that's enough, right? As long as they praise you, you're happy. You humans ask for too much..."

On that note, Sousei-san fell silent. He had only been activated several years ago, but his words filled with emotion spoke to his actual experience.

Though he was a robot, Sousei-san's personality was quite humanlike, and I wondered if somehow it was influenced by what he had seen and experienced in the past. The name "Yuuri" that he had inadvertently let fall. It was the name of a woman. It may have been the name of someone who had a deep connection to Sousei-san's past.

I was becoming more and more intrigued by Sousei-san's past, but I shook off the temptation and told him:

“In any case, let’s go around the school building and search for Miyuki Midorikawa’s past conversations.”

At present, that was our greatest priority.

“Well, the work’s a pain, but it’s fun feeling like we’ll definitely find treasure.”

Sousei-san answered lightly, as if his sullen demeanor until a little while ago was nothing more than an illusion.

“…I wonder. The situation right now is more serious than before. Personally, I already feel that we’re digging up live shells rather than treasure.”

So I responded lightly, pretending I had not noticed.

April 2 Yagokoro High School School Building

We decided that the timeframe for detection of past conversations would be half a year ago to the present. It was determined that the only person related to Yagokoro High School who had passed away during that period was Miyuki Midorikawa. In

other words, by doing this, we would limit what we would detect to Miyuki Midorikawa's conversations alone.

It had been about an hour since we had started investigating the school building. As planned, we had succeeded in detecting a number of conversations. However, unfortunately they were all normal, everyday conversations, and we did not obtain any particular information likely to be connected to the case.

–It was after using our Personas multiple times in succession. Putting aside Sousei-san, who was a robot, I, who had a flesh body, was just about to propose a break because my physical strength was exhausted. Sousei-san and I exchanged glances at the same time at the contents of a conversation we had detected at a certain place.

"…Whoa, what a scary face! Yeah, yeah, as expected of Mr. Student Council President, you're really different from a low-class girl like me… I'll say it! It's fine if I say

it! The reason's simple, I hate that girl! So I put her on the Midnight Site! That's all!"

"Aah, geez! Shut up, shut up! You preach too much! Anyway, even you know we can't do anything now that it's gone this far, right? If you say you'll stop it no matter what, then just shut up the jurors under the name 'Sarutahiko'!"

"...I haven't told anyone, you really are a wimp of a guy! Even though I'm following your orders and not talking to you at school at all! I pretend not to know you even if we pass in the hall! Say it straight out! I'm worried about that girl! I like 'Kaoru Hioka'! I said it but you're the one who thinks that! It's because you're making eyes at that girl..."

"...I-it's not my fault! I only scattered the bait! The rest was the jurors just swallowing it and kicking up a fuss and that girl went and died on her own! ...Hey... I'll listen to whatever you say... So... Don't abandon me..."

"This is suspicious... Have we found treasure?" Sousei-san grinned broadly.

“…Yes, we found a live shell. An extra-large one.” I nodded quietly.

It could be called a breakthrough in the development of the disappearance case. To calm my feeling of impatience, I took a single deep breath.

“…In this moment, you could say that we have overturned the known relation between Miyuki Midorikawa and Shirou Konno, who according to the police’s investigation and the information provided by the students, shared no common point.”

Sousei-san, who did not seem to comprehend, scowled at the words that appeared on Tsukuyomi’s headpiece with a grim look.

“Please look here.” I pointed out one phrase on the marquee with my finger.

“Hm? Mr. Student Council President…?”

Sousei-san repeated it curiously, but when he realized the answer, his expression instantly brightened.

“Oi! Naoto! Good job!”

He grabbed me by the shoulders. It may have been out of excitement, but in truth, it hurt.

“…Yes, as you’ve guessed, the student council president – you would be correct in thinking he is Shirou Konno.”

That the missing Shirou Konno was the student council president had also been specified in the case file. In addition, the place where we were at was within sight of the student council room. I hypothesized that Miyuki Midorikawa and Shirou Konno’s conversations had taken place inside the student council room.

“There is one more thing. In the case that the person Miyuki Midorikawa was speaking to is indeed Shirou Konno, there is something we can say with high probability – that Shirou Konno is alive.”

“…Right. ‘Cause we didn’t detect him in the past conversations!”

We had finally reached this wonderful result due to Sousei-san's Persona's ability.

"As expected of my great Persona! It's really true, in the end, I'm a genius!"

Nonetheless, because the person in question was getting carried away, I thought to myself that I would definitely not praise him. Rather, I was of the opinion that I should remonstrate him.

"...Sousei-san. It's not like the case is settled and you're overcome with joy; if Touko-san saw you, she would roar with laughter, you know?"

"Don't you have any confidence? If it's like this, the case'll be over in a flash, right? Or are all detective guys full of hot air like you?"

He spoke in a roundabout way, and Sousei-san gave a displeased snort of laughter.

"Please call it being cool and collected."

As a detective, it was essential to maintain a way of thinking so sensitive as to be called excessively

cautious. That was because the mistakes of a detective would not be forgiven. Especially for me, who carried the reputation of the Shirogane name, as one who was sought after for capability above that of the police. If not for that, my existence had no meaning. To exaggerate, the existence of the detective Naoto Shirogane was permitted only when someone needed her.

“What, that’s stupid.”

The rude manner of Sousei-san’s response as he spat that out, as if to say it was nothing but a pain, was impulsive and just like him, and I smiled wryly and gave up. It was proof that I was little by little coming to understand the person called Sousei Kurogami.

“The relation between Miyuki Midorikawa, who has passed away, and Shirou Konno, who is missing, was in their conversation. The next question would be, ‘Why was it necessary for the two of them to hide their relation from those around them?’”

“If you just think about it, isn’t it the guy’s ego? If

they knew the student council president was hanging out with a woman with a bad rep, it wouldn't look good, right? And what they were talking about sounded like a lover's quarrel. I can imagine a hysterical woman getting jealous 'cause the guy's fooling around."

Sousei-san replied immediately.

"I think that possibility does also exist. However, the two of them unmistakably share another unknown common feature."

I pointed out one word in the past conversation.
"'Sarutahiko'...?" Sousei-san tilted his head.

"Sousei-san, do you remember the name 'Uzume'?"

"Huh? Don't screw with me! Like I'd forget the stuff I just heard last night! Uzume's that, right? The screenname Miyuki Midorikawa took as one of the 'Five Togakushi Judges', right?"

"Correct," I answered, trying not to laugh. Sousei-san's childish behavior when he had become angry

and answered was just a little bit funny.

“Then do you remember the name ‘Sarutahiko’? I explained it last night, if you recall?”

However, “…Guh.” Sousei-san unfortunately fell silent at the next question.

“By the way, Sarutahiko is also the screenname of one of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’.”

Sousei-san folded his arms and stroked his chin with his fingertips.

“…So that’s the way it is? That the past conversation is saying Shirou Konno is Sarutahiko.”

I nodded quietly.

“Miyuki Midorikawa and Shirou Konno’s common point is that they were members of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’. Wasn’t hiding their relationship from the people around them also a discreet cautionary measure taken so others would not be aware they were members of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’?”

Most likely it was Shirou Konno's initiative. From both the case file and Miyuki Midorikawa's past conversations, it was clear that Shirou Konno was a careful individual.

"By the way, what are these 'jurors'? Someone's name? Or is it also a screenname?"

"No, it seems the ordinary users of the Midnight Site are called 'jurors'. The jurors hold the rights to vote guilty or not guilty. In Japanese, 'juror' is 'baishinin'. And the judges are 'saibankan'. In other words, one can deduce that the aim of the Midnight Site is to 'Carry out judgment in the middle of the night.'"

"...Judgment, huh. The defendants the judges frame don't get even a speck of fairness when their guilt is considered."

"Yes, it's more like a witch hunt."

I nodded firmly. Miyuki Midorikawa, called Uzume, had fabricated completely false sins, and Kaoru Hioka had been made to suffer reasonless slander. Only she herself knew whether it had been an

accident or suicide, but it was surely an unreasonable end.

Immediately afterward, Sousei-san shook his head as if fed up.

“...Hey, Naoto, can I say something here?”

“We can’t.”

I instantly denied him. That was because I could predict what Sousei-san meant to say.

“Let’s leave Shirou Konno. It’s fine. Let Kyouhei Hioka have his revenge.”

He ignored me completely.

“It’s not like I use the Internet all the time or looked into the ‘Midnight Site’ a lot either. Still, I get it. Those guys who have to do with the Midnight Site are a really tightfisted bunch.”

Sousei-san spat out.

“Starting up the Midnight Site, naming themselves the Five Togakushi Judges, I don’t know who the hell

you are, but who are you to judge other people? Can your actions be forgiven? Who's gonna judge your sins? I wanna ask those bastards that!"

"You're going too far. They also have their own circumstances."

I answered, taking it upon myself to strongly reprimand Sousei-san, who had lost his temper.

"Circumstances? Are you an idiot? Everyone alive's got their own circumstances! Even I do and I'm a robot!"

I had added fuel to the fire.

"Don't let yourself be controlled by your emotions. There are rules in this world. If everyone acted on their emotions, the order of the world would soon crumble."

"You're a cold human. Don't you have any sympathy at all for Kyouhei Hioka?"

"Even I can sympathize with Kyouhei Hioka's situation. However, this and that are really two

different problems. In the end, a killer is a killer. Even if we have the luxury to take extenuating circumstances into consideration, his are not actions that can be forgiven by any means."

"Geez, you really have an answer for everything!"

"I could say exactly the same to you!"

I was being quite frank. There was also a part of me that conceded Sousei-san's point. However, those were my personal feelings. As a detective, I was of the belief that I could not overlook a crime right before my eyes.

I let out a single, small sigh.

"...As for ourselves, there is something only we can do."

I looked straight at Sousei-san and told him.

"Let's do what we can, believing that Kyouhei Hioka's greatest hope of salvation is that we won't let anyone else killed by him."

"...I dunno if we'll regret this."

Sousei-san snorted morosely.

"...That's true. I'll endeavor to make the very best choices so it doesn't come to that."

I responded with a bitter smile. If I didn't believe and take a step forward, I would definitely not be able to proceed onwards. I persuaded myself with a wavering heart.

April 2 Yagokoro Police Station Special Forensics Division Director's Office

I returned to the Yagokoro Police station and searched for Touko-san. It was to report on the investigation up until now and to hear about what kind of person Kyouhei Hioka was.

I thought I might be able to see Touko-san if I showed up at the Criminal Enforcement Division where her desk was, but I was mistaken. Touko-san's desk was empty.

I thought I would ask someone as to Touko-san's whereabouts, but within the office, which was

disorderly with mountains of case files and white tobacco smoke that obscured visibility, the detectives directed aggressive looks shot through with seething anger at me, an outsider to the division, and I hesitated to speak to them readily.

There was nothing I could do, so I went around the station myself. However, I went around and looked everywhere, but I could not find Touko-san anywhere. The place I reached at last was the director's office of the Special Forensics Division under Tsuge-san.

"Touko? Dunno. Haven't seen her since she came to drink coffee this morning."

My last hope was swiftly dashed.

"Well, if you wait she'll come back, right?"

Tsuge-san said carelessly as he processed the documents on his desk.

"Geez, you're useless, Gramps!"

Sousei-san was disgusted, but:

“Tsuge-san, I’ll be borrowing your computer again.”

I was going to investigate some details related to the case while waiting for Touko-san as Tsuge-san had suggested.

“Oi oi, what should I do?”

“Please stay quiet over there.”

As if my way of handling Sousei-san was entertaining:

“Right! Do what you’re told, Sousei!”

Tsuge-san’s large body shook as he laughed.

“You’re annoying! Gramps! Shut your trap!”

Sousei-san threw himself on the sofa as one would when staying in bed out of spite.

Their argument continued behind me as I started up the computer.

“Oi! Gramps! I’m bored!”

“Like I care, idiot! Go read the magazine on the desk or something!”

“That’s an idol magazine! Act your age, Gramps!”

“What! The kids’ll get upset if you’re like that! Women’s naked bodies are the last mystery left on Earth! It’s an eternal research theme needed to dispel doubts about your status as a man!”

“What research theme!? You dirty old man! Isn’t that just your lust!?”

“I’m not denying there’s lust, but I don’t like being insulted, so I’ll tell you the idol magazine isn’t mine! Touko left it here this morning, idiot!”

“…Seriously? Touko’s a good woman without any masculinity. To think these idols are her hobby.”

“…Even if you’re joking, don’t say such scary things. I’ll start imagining it. Uh, no, that’s kinda a turn-on too…”

I thought that if Touko-san had heard, the two of them would be sorry.

Finally, I heard the sound of the magazine pages being turned behind me. It seemed that somehow

Sousei-san had begun to read the idol magazine as he spoke. It was at that moment.

"...Huh? What's this about... Am I seeing things...?"

Sousei-san spoke in an uncharacteristically bewildered voice.

"Oi! Gramps! Come here a sec! Look at this!"

"I'm busy! What is it, idiot!? Who do you think I am!? I'm the director, you know? I've got more social responsibility than you think, okay?"

As he complained, I heard the sound of Tsuge-san's footsteps as he stood from his seat and headed to the sofa.

"Huh? Huuuh? W-what is this... S'like I'm seeing things..."

Tsuge-san was immediately surprised just like Sousei-san.

Predictably, I started to wonder what in the world it was, so I turned my chair and looked back at the two of them. When I did, the two of them blinked and

gazed at me fixedly.

"...Eh? What? What is it?"

I drew back in that instant, feeling something like dread. Instead of answering, the two of them looked back and forth between me and the magazine, comparing us.

Then, at Tsuge-san's next words, I sprung from the chair without thinking.

"That surprised me! Boy, you're – a girl!"

Flustered, I ran up to the two of them and peered at the magazine. In that moment, a sound rang out. That was the sound of the blood draining from my face.

On the open color pages of the magazine, a girl clothed in a red bikini and a girl clothed in a navy blue bikini were playing together in the waves. By the way, it could not be helped that the girl in the navy blue bikini's smile was stiff.

I had a flashback to the memories of about a week

ago. It was a shot from that time, when there was a photoshoot at the “Yagokoro Premium Gaia” of gravure photos that were to be published in a magazine.

My whole body was so hot it felt as if it were burning. My field of vision was distorted and my thoughts were jumbled together so confusingly I couldn’t think. It felt like I would unthinkingly scream because of this turmoil I had never before experienced. “Ah, oh, ooh…” However, I couldn’t even find my voice at such a shock.

“What was that! Gramps! You didn’t know Naoto is a woman! Can’t you tell just by looking!?”

No, even you didn’t know until yesterday.

“‘Cause Touko didn’t say anything! I did think she’s too slender for a guy, but she acts like one and they call her Detective Prince, so wouldn’t you normally think she’s one?”

“Yeah, well. But right now the issue isn’t something as boring as if Naoto is a man or a woman!”

Sousei-san pulled the magazine even further open and held it out.

“Look! At Naoto’s cleavage here!”

“Yeah! Not bad, not bad at all!”

With a lewd look on his face, Tsuge-san brought his face close to the magazine and looked between me and the gravure photoshoot picture, comparing us.

“...Hmph. I didn’t realize yesterday, but you’ve got some really impressive goods! Geez, say something sooner! I’m the kind of guy that thinks you should act like a woman if you are one!”

I only saw it out of the corner of my eye, but Tsuge-san’s face was very frightening as he bowed his head as if charmed, and I shuddered. I mustered up my willpower and snatched the magazine from Sousei-san. I was exceedingly embarrassed and was overcome by the urge to immediately put the magazine through the shredder.

“What’re you doing, Naoto! We were still looking at

that! Give it back!”

“I — I refuse!”

“Hahaa, so you’re embarrassed!”

Sousei-san raised his voice delightedly. In the next instant, my face became hot as if a fire had been lit.

“I-it’s a swimsuit! O-of course it would be embarrassing!”

My voice cracked with agitation.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, right? ‘Cause you’ve got impressive goods.”

Sousei-san’s gaze was focused on my chest. I panicked and covered my chest with the magazine.

“P-please stop calling them ‘goods’!”

“Be more confident, Naoto! I’ve changed my opinion! Women with big boobs aren’t bad at all! Big is good no matter what it is!”

“Yeah! Big boobs are the greatest thing God created in this world! And they say too big is better than too small! If it’s just bust size, you don’t even lose to Touko! Whoa! It’ll be fun seeing what kind of good woman you become in the future!”

I wondered what it meant that this was the only time the two of them were in perfect accord.

“Oi! Give back the magazine! I’m bored!”

“I’m confiscating it! Just behave yourself over there!”

Shaking off Sousei-san as he approached, I turned on my heel and headed for the computer at a swift pace. I could not stand any further disgrace.

“Geez, what’s with you! What’re you getting mad about? Naoto!”

“…That’s not it, Sousei. That’s not anger. She’s embarrassed. Isn’t she cute?”

“Hmm, I can’t tell the difference. Hey, Naoto, are you embarrassed?”

“It’s supposed to be pretty popular with young people lately. That’s definitely that ‘tsundere’ thing!”

“What’s that about? Hey, Naoto, are you ‘tsundere’?”

…I couldn't take it any longer, I didn't know anymore, I didn't hear anything.

"Anyway. She looks like she's got her act together, but Naoto's still a mature young woman. This is pretty tough. Be gentle."

"That's right. Let's be gentle."

…Calm down, calm down, you mustn't get angry, ignore them, ignore, if you shout, you lose. If I didn't tell myself that, I felt that I would forget myself and yell "Please be quiet!" in a loud voice.

Touko-san was Touko-san. Why did she leave that magazine here of all places? There was no way that Touko-san, who I had met on that day, did not know that my original purpose had not been to participate in a gravure photoshoot.

…Ah, was that how it was?

I covered my face with both hands and let out a great sigh. Surely, at this moment, Touko-san was unmistakably gloating somewhere.

I pulled myself together and turned my attention to the computer screen. I moved the mouse and clicked once. The image of the Midnight Site came up. I calmly opened the message board.

In the next instant, my gaze was arrested.

“Sousei-san! Please come here!” I immediately beckoned Sousei-san over.

“Oi! What’s with you! Telling me to come here and go there!”

“It’s fine, hurry!”

I urged him, not caring, and the sound of his displeased footsteps echoed inside the room.

“…Look at this.”

I directed his gaze, and Sousei-san, wearing a sullen expression, scowled at the computer screen. When he saw what had been written on the message board, Sousei-san’s eyes also widened in surprise.

“MY NAME IS – KAGU-TSUCHI. MY GRUDGE IS

BORN FROM THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CONDEMNED. I HAVE COME HERE TO HAND DOWN JUDGMENT UPON THOSE WHO CALL THEMSELVES TOGAKUSHI AND DECEIVE WITH FALSE JUSTICE. I HAVE ALREADY DISPOSED OF ONE OF THE TOGAKUSHI, 'UZUME'. I PROCLAIM HERE THAT THE REMAINING FOUR SHALL ALSO BE CONSIGNED TO OBLIVION. OMOIKANE, SARUTAHIKO, TAJIKARAO, FUTODAMA, TREMBLE IN FEAR OF YOUR IMPENDING DEMISE AT MY HANDS."

"…Isn't this a 'declaration to kill'?"

Perhaps he had been interested by our extraordinary behavior. Behind me, a large man, Tsuge-san, was standing in a pose one might assume if thinking.

"…Yes. That's the intention of the person who calls himself 'Kagu-tsuchi'."

The reactions of the jurors, the site's users, were the

same as our own. The declaration to kill was the main topic of discussion on the Midnight Site's message boards. However, going back through the boards, it seemed they thought in the beginning that it was a prank.

However, what the person called Kagu-tsuchi had posted was a type of topic only the Five Togakushi Judges could start, and on top of that, the account that had been used was Uzume's, so the authenticity of the post had risen at once. Even now, it was getting so much attention that the comments from the jurors increased by about ten or twelve whenever it updated.

"...It seems the prediction of a revenge tragedy was correct, though I did not want it to be."

The reason that Kyouhei Hioka was still missing had become clear.

"So Kagu-tsuchi really is Kyouhei Hioka?"

"Considering Uzume's case, I can only believe it's a screenname he is operating under."

In the next moment, Sousei-san laughed nastily.

“Ha! I don’t feel sorry for ‘em! This is what they call karma! They should be scared! If they are they’ll finally understand the feelings of the sinners they called guilty!”

“Sousei-san–” At Sousei-san’s way of speaking, like he was egging on the revenge tragedy, I opened my mouth and made to issue a warning.

“–Hey, did Kyouhei do something?”

However, before I could say anything, Tsuge-san asked, his brow deeply furrowed. He spoke as if he knew Kyouhei Hioka well.

“…Do you know him?”

“Yeah, we met ‘bout six years ago. It’s the sort of relationship where we’d get dinner together if he showed up.”

“What about his disappearance?”

“Yeah, I heard about it from Touko…”

It had been only a momentary slipup, but there was no way to hide it, and so I continued speaking.

"...The truth is, there is a high probability that he has committed murder to avenge his younger sister. In addition, there is also the possibility that he will continue to kill from now on."

In the next moment, the crease in Tsuge-san's brow deepened further.

"Why... That blockhead... Even though I told him nothing would come of getting revenge..."

Returning to the sofa with weighty steps, Tsuge-san then sat with the same heaviness. Though I felt it to be harsh, as a detective, I sat facing Tsuge-san. "I'll explain," I said, and summarized the chain of events.

"...It's already been 'bout half a year. The last time I saw Kyouhei, about two months had passed since his sister's funeral."

When I had finished explaining, this time Tsuge-san

began to speak.

“As soon as I saw him, Kyouhei said this to me: ‘Kaoru’s death wasn’t an accident.’ Seemed like he’d somehow heard about what was worrying his sister from the guys at her school. Kyouhei regretted it terribly. Blamed himself a lot for not doing anything even though something was bothering her.”

Right now, Tsuge-san had a quiet expression, so much so that I could not believe this to be the same person who up until now I had viewed as a bit boldly lecherous.

“…That man Kyouhei Hioka is excellent, but he’s so serious and inflexible he’s practically got a stick up his ass. I thought Kyouhei shouldn’t push himself too hard, and I kept telling him ‘It’s not your fault your sister died,’ even though I knew they were just cheap words. But he said, ‘I’ll find out the truth, even if it’s by myself. If I don’t at least do that, I won’t be able to face Kaoru. I apologize, that’s just how I feel…’ and stubbornly refused to give in…”

Tsuge-san let out a large breath and shook his head strongly.

"...Wonder if it's something like tragic resolve... I was so worried about Kyouhei I told Touko about it... I thought Touko could do it, but in the end, she couldn't stop him, huh..."

"From the way you speak, I take it Touko-san is also an acquaintance of Kyouhei Hioka?"

At my question, Tsuge-san immediately nodded.

"Those two've known each other longer than I have. Seems like when Touko was a newbie, Kyouhei was her senpai and drilled her in the ABCs of being a detective."

"...I see. So the two of them have a senpai-kouhai relationship."

It was a bit difficult to imagine Touko-san as a beginner, but it made clear the reason for her selection as a principal member of the "Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case" team.

"...Also, I don't really know much about it, but–"

Tsuge-san lowered his voice.

"–I kind of remember hearing from one of them that Touko and Kyouhei were living together once. It was when Touko was a newbie, so I guess about six years ago. Anyway, I met Kyouhei 'cause Touko introduced us. It's probably the truth."

"When you say 'once', you mean they aren't now?"

"Yeah, they broke up. Just that I don't really know when they separated. But Touko and Kyouhei still go drinking together sometimes even though they're not together anymore."

"...Heeh, so Touko does that. With a man. You told us something interesting!"

"Oi, Sousei, keep it under wraps! If you tell her she'll never acknowledge me!"

"Whatever you say, Touko doesn't acknowledge you in the first place, Gramps!"

"That's why I'm telling you it's a secret! You know

how Touko hates people sticking their nose in her business, Sousei!"

"Okay, what should I do! Hey Gramps, if you bow your head and say, 'Please, Sousei-sama, I'm begging you!' I'll keep my mouth shut, okay?"

"Sousei! You bastard! D'ya know who you're mouthing off to? I'll turn you into scrap metal right now!"

"Yeah! Bring it on! Do it if you can! You senile old man!"

What an unexpected result. That Tsuge-san had also been so well acquainted with Kyouhei Hioka.

It could be said that the fact that Kyouhei Hioka had also spoken with Tsuge-san about his regret at the loss of his sister was the conclusive piece of evidence that this murder case was fueled by revenge. In addition, the most important product of the conversation was that Kyouhei Hioka and Touko-san had once been lovers. It was becoming increasingly necessary to meet with Touko-san

personally and inquire about Kyouhei Hioka.

Sousei-san and Tsuge-san continued to argue even as I put my thoughts in order. It seemed they would continue indefinitely if I just let them be.

“Both of you! This is not the time to be fighting! Our priority should be to think about how we should handle this situation!”

I forced my way between the two large men, who were glaring at each other. I may as well have stepped into a chasm between multistory buildings.

“Sousei-san, please think about it a little. And Tsuge-san, please lend us your wisdom.”

At that, Sousei-san and Tsuge-san both looked down at me and finally shrugged their shoulders as if giving up.

“Oi, Gramps. Let’s stop out of respect for Naoto’s ‘big boobs’.”

“Fine. As a man, I can’t go against ‘big boobs’ either. Let’s call it a truce.”

Wearing serious expressions, the two nodded at each other.

"...As long as you stop." It would be foolish to become angry.

If I allowed myself to become caught up between them, the conversation would not progress no matter how much time passed. This was the point at which I had to take command. I diverted the conversation to the issue at hand, even if it was against my will.

"Since persuasion is unfeasible, I think the first solution would be to secure Kyouhei Hioka himself. Then we would only physically put an end to his revenge tragedy."

"I get that, but aren't Touko and them looking for where Kyouhei Hioka is? LIke you said yesterday, Naoto, won't those guys say it's 'a different area' from ours if we stick our necks into the Kyouhei Hioka case?"

"The situation has changed since yesterday. It has

been proven that the ‘Yagokoro High School student disappearance case’ we were commissioned for and the ‘Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case’ are in fact one and the same.”

“No no, if the situation really has changed, there’s still no way we’d abort our investigation, right? They’ll say it’s not your place, ya know?”

“Even so, I have no intention of backing out.”

I immediately shook my head.

“Even on Touko’s orders?”

“A foolish question. It is not my style as a detective to do something like abandon an ongoing case.”

My resolve was firm. It would be accurate to call this my belief. Of course, it may also have been due to my own nature.

“Tsuge-san, would you happen to have an idea as to Kyouhei Hioka’s whereabouts?”

“…Naah, even though I’ve been thinking on it for a while. Sorry, I can only think of things like his home

and his favorite bar."

Tsuge-san shrugged his large shoulders slightly.

"Geez, Gramps, you're useless! They wouldn't be having trouble if he was hiding in those obvious places! Touko's looking into it, right? He would've been caught a long time ago!"

"Shut up! I know that much even without you telling me!"

"...In that case, we may instead take the option of sheltering Kyouhei Hioka's 'targets' here."

I continued, ignoring their argument.

"It's clear that the ones Kyouhei Hioka is targeting are the members of the 'Five Togakushi Judges', so if we take the remaining four under police protection, it should prevent his crimes."

"Oh! I get it! It's the opposite idea!"

I nodded at Tsuge-san. The cooperation of those in question was indispensable, but if we had the members of the Five Togakushi Judges in our hands,

we should well be able to limit Kyouhei Hioka's actions.

"For instance, if we say 'The police will guarantee your safety,' I think they will accept the police's protection as long as they aren't exceedingly reckless, but..."

Of course, this idea was not without its flaws.

"...The biggest problem is that the whereabouts of the members of the Five Togakushi Judges are unknown."

There was plenty of information to sniff out their whereabouts, such as the fact that, other than celebrities, the chosen sinners were residents around the Yagokoro area, but there was a limit to guesswork.

"Can't we post a comment on the site message boards? We're the police, but we'll protect you, so tell us how to find you?"

"That's impossible."

I immediately replied to Sousei-san.

“They received declaration to kill from Kagu-tsuchi, an enemy whose true identity is unknown. No matter what we post, I don’t think they would believe us.”

“Then how ‘bout we ask the police bigshots to appeal to the media to go, ‘You Five Togakushi Judge shitheads, get out here’?”

“That’s also impossible.”

Once again, I immediately replied.

“It’s difficult to believe that people such as they would readily reveal themselves publicly.”

“Even if their lives were in danger?”

“…Most likely. But frankly, I’m not sure either. How do they perceive the ‘lives’ contained within themselves?”

It seemed I would have to directly ask the people in question.

“Getting a taste of the feeling like they’re gonna die, isn’t that really necessary for guys like them? Isn’t it? There are definitely things you can’t convey through a screen, right?”

No matter how one looked at them, Sousei-san’s suggestions were much too drastic, but somehow, I understood what he was trying to say.

“That’s beside the point. The biggest flaw is that Kyouhei Hioka will also know of the police’s appeal. Kyouhei Hioka is certainly keeping an eye on the Midnight Site, so to avoid taking any risks, it would be to our advantage to operate secretly as much as possible…”

Sousei-san had his arms crossed, deep in thought. I was in the same situation. We were desperately racking our brains, searching for any effective method. Time passed in silence as we could not easily find a solution.

And then “–Uh, hey.” Tsuge-san slowly opened his mouth.

“In the end my specialty is robot engineering, so I dunno much about recent Internet conditions and technology, but that Kirijo family’s got a world-famous guy working for ‘em. I can ask for his help if you want?”

Was this to be our hope? I nodded firmly. “Please do.”

“Ah, there’s just one problem.”

“…A problem?”

“That guy’s with anti-cyber terrorism, so he’s in demand by everyone. Runs all over the world. I dunno what country he’s in now. Could be even if I contact him, he might not be able to start this job right away…”

Even now, the threat of cyber terrorism was universal. If he was a skilled technician, he would be assured of a warm welcome no matter where he went. However, if he was that capable a person, he would not be defeated, even if the opponent was a hacker who evenly matched the police’s Anti-Cyber

Crime Team.

Time was of the essence, but there was no other effective method. We did not have many other possibilities.

“Please, we’re counting on you.” I bowed my head to Tsuge-san once again.

That day, Touko-san did not appear at the station. So I made my report by phone late at night.

I proceeded to speak on a number of topics in turn: that Sousei-san’s “Past Reading” was powered up by my “Ability Tune” and we collected information at school and at Iwato Apartments, as well as the declaration to kill from the person who called himself Kagu-tsuchi, and the possibility that Sarutahiko was Shirou Konno.

“…Got it. I’ll explain the situation to the higher-ups and get permission.”

It was an ex-post-facto approval, but she did not seem to be particularly bothered by our judgment

concerning the invitation of an anti-cyber terrorism expert and the security offered to the members of the “Five Togakushi Judges”. I inquired as to the reason.

“Why? I’m grateful to you. We were also stuck in a stalemate. That aside, Naoto, that your partnership with Sousei would yield such results after only two days is well beyond what I anticipated. Since I was the one who thought of pairing you up, it seems like I have clear foresight beyond my Persona ability.

“Fufufu.” On the other side of the phone, Touko-san laughed a little. Far away, I could hear jazz-like music. She may have been drinking sake at a bar somewhere.

Next I reproached her for the incident involving the idol magazine, but Touko-san was not at all repentant.

“Wash it on purpose? Don’t be rude! I’m a detective who works hesself to the bone night and day for the safety of the citizens. There’sh no way I would do

anything people would dislike, right?"

Parts of her articulation were suspicious. She was most likely very drunk.

"Well, in any case, it's been a disaster, Naotoo! Good grief!"

[Here, Touko is mixing up words with similar pronunciations. I'm not sure what the first word is supposed to be ("sainan", disaster), but in the second line, she says "goshuushou", "grief", instead of "gokurou", something like "good work".]

A dry laugh echoed through the telephone receiver. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she showed herself to be a rambunctious drunkard who enjoyed doing things that people disliked.

I judged that I might be able to hear something at this time, and so I asked about the Kyouhei Hioka incident.

"...I was pretty young when I was with Kyouhei. Sorry I can't live up to the Detective Prince's

expectations, but it's a private matter that has absolutely nothing to do with the current case. Please forget about it."

Her tone was low, like that of a completely different person.

Though they were apart now, the person she had once gone out with, the senpai who had taught her the ABCs of investigation when she was a newcomer, had committed murder. Touko-san's heart must be unsettled. So much so that she was almost unable to hold her alcohol.

Quite frankly, she had evaded the subject, but when I imagined Touko-san's feelings, I could not bring myself to press the matter.

"Well, we'll continue this conversation later. Touko-san, I believe that you'll talk about it someday, so I'll wait."

However, the only thing I would not forget was the way in which she had diverted my attention. My feelings of sympathy were separate from my

feelings of wanting to discover the truth.

"...I'll count on it. I still have a pretty discerning eye."

On the other end of the line, Touko-san laughed like she was enjoying herself.

April 4 Yagokoro Police Station Special Forensics Division

Two days after the body of Miyuki Midorikawa was discovered at Iwato Apartments, several truths were coming to light.

From the autopsy results, the marks characteristic of the pistol, called "rifling marks", were a match with the Sig Saeur P230 Kyouhei Hioka was carrying. It was also revealed that Miyuki Midorikawa was missing her cell phone. I was of the opinion that Kyouhei Hioka had taken it.

If I thought assuming that the person who called himself Kagu-tsuchi was Kyouhei Hioka, it validated the theory that he posted a comment on the

Midnight Site from Miyuki Midorikawa's, that is to say Uzume's, cell phone. If he had her phone, he would be able to access the site as Uzume, even if he wasn't the person in question.

Whenever the truth became clearer, it supported the existence of Kyouhei Hioka's crimes. When I considered how Tsuge-san and Touko-san must be feeling, I also held mixed feelings.

We received good news from Tsuge-san the next day. On top of managing to contact the anti-cyber terrorism expert, it turned out he was staying in Japan and could immediately take on the job.

Again on that same day. We received word that he had successfully broken through the security on the Midnight Site and gained administrator access. According to the expert, "...It was more troublesome than I expected." It seemed the security on the Midnight Site was high level, for a first-class expert to say so.

When I received the e-mail from Tsuge-san during

class, I impatiently said, “Sir! I’m not feeling well, so I’m leaving early!”, fled the classroom cheerfully, and hurried to the Yagokoro police station.

When the elevator door opened, I was surprised. The usually dreary Special Forensics Division floor was crowded with police and their associates. They were packed tightly into the director’s office like sardines, and my vision was clouded white by tobacco smoke. This could be called an indication of the degree of seriousness with which the police were tackling the “Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case”.

According to an active detective, it was a murder case. Furthermore, it was a lethal shooting case. The societal repercussions grew daily. The reports were top news day after day in the newspapers and on television.

Moreover, Kyouhei Hioka was still missing. The citizens’ feeling of endangerment was becoming stronger day by day, and their criticism of the police,

who were unable to grasp any substantial leads, also heightened. It was top priority, where the police's dignity was riding on being able to resolve the case as soon as possible.

As there was no place for them, Tsuge-san and Sousei-san were huddled in a corner of the director's office. When I met Tsuge-san's eyes, his large eyebrows knitted and he shrugged his shoulders. There was no place for me either, and so I pushed through the people, heading to where Tsuge-san was. Tsuge-san sighed, "Geez, I wish they'd forgive me," and when I asked him about the situation, this was the result of attempting to quickly contact the administrators of the Midnight Site at Touko-san's direction.

It seemed that the information about "being offered police protection" had been sent to the e-mail addresses of the site administrators, as we had spoken about the day before yesterday.

Would there really be a response to the police's

actions? Not even an hour ago, those worries of ours had been swept away. There was a reply from an administrator.

“I am one of the Five Togakushi Judges – Omoikane. I don’t want to die. I await detailed instructions.”

It was brief, but it was a promising response to the police’s offer.

Nevertheless, Omoikane was unusually wary and would not so easily swallow the terms dictated by the police. He was the person who had set up the strong security and protected the site from the outside. It could be said that ordinary methods would not work with him. They had spent the past hour on repeated fruitless disputes. At last, Omoikane suggested his requirement.

It was to send someone to the food court of “Yagokoro Junes”, the large supermarket in front of Yagokoro Station, on Sunday in three days’ time. Furthermore, he specified a woman. His true

intention may have been to do something to her with brute force if necessary. If that was the case, it disagreed with me immensely.

“Oi, oi! Is it okay to meet up someplace as public as a food court? And on Sunday, won’t there be a bunch of families there?”

“That’s why. I think his suggestion makes sense.”

Touko-san calmly answered Sousei-san, whose voice was conspicuously loud even within the clamor.

“He seems like the type of person who would expressly specify a powerless woman. If you consider the worst case scenario, if Kagu-tsuchi targets his life, he can take advantage of the confusion, slip into the crowd, or possibly use a child as a shield. Didn’t he judge a food court as the most ideal place in which to protect himself?”

“Keh! He’s a complete shithead!”

“It’s all right. The worst case scenario won’t come to

pass. The suspect we're after is a murderer, but his objective is not to kill indiscriminately. He definitely won't start anything in a place like that, where innocent bystanders might get involved. In the first place. We must not have the suspect know about our contact with Omoikane. For that reason… the one who will negotiate with Omoikane–"

At the continuation of Touko-san's speech, all the police and associates gathered within the director's office grew agitated.

"–I think I'll leave it to Naoto Shirogane."

Naturally, this was the also first I had heard of this, and so I wore exactly the same expression of shock as those around me.

"Assistant Inspector Aoi, what is the meaning of that decision?"

"Please wait! More importantly! Isn't Naoto Shirogane a man!?"

"And isn't Naoto Shirogane an outsider!?"

“That’s right! If we leave such an important job to an outsider, what do you intend to do in the worst case scenario!?”

Their sharp gazes simultaneously focused on me, and voices raised in dissatisfaction around the director’s office. It was like standing on a bed of coals.

“...It’s because she’s an outsider.”

Touko-san said as she brushed a strand of hair up languidly.

“Are you forgetting the fact that we’ve found absolutely no trace of the suspect, even though we’ve continued the investigation with several hundred people?”

Touko-san surveyed everyone in the room with a cold gaze.

“Isn’t that because the suspect, an assistant inspector, is reading our movements? The suspect knows the faces of the police. If we take conspicuous

action, there's the possibility the suspect will know that we have come into contact with Omoikane."

Touko-san kept the same demeanor as ever as she held the attention of the veteran detectives, whose ages differed so much from my own that the gap was similar to that between parent and child, and the uniformed police officers, who at a glance seemed to be of high rank.

"In that case, the suspect won't be able to recognize Naoto Shirogane."

"You can't believe the suspect and Omoikane don't know about the Detective Prince?"

So asked a person who appeared to be a veteran detective.

"Of course they know about the Detective Prince."

"So why!"

"So are there any among you? Anyone who knows that – Naoto Shirogane is actually a 'woman'?"

"To-Touko-san!"

For the second time, all eyes in the room were on me. Their gazes were obviously different from before, like they were seeing a strange thing. It felt as if I was being appraised to determine if I was actually a girl.

I immediately hid my face. I flushed red to the tips of my ears. My secret had suddenly been exposed in the presence of everyone, and I felt as if I would die from embarrassment.

“As you can see. If she dresses like a girl, she can deceive the eyes of not just the suspect, but any onlookers.”

Touko-san smiled fearlessly.

“And also, who was it that verified the relation between the Midnight Site and Kyouhei Hioka – everyone, I would have you not forget that it was the detective Naoto Shirogane. Incidentally, it would please me if you would remember who exactly it was who commissioned Naoto Shirogane, even though she faced opposition from those around her.”

Touko-san narrowed her eyes at the surrounding police, and the dissatisfied voices suddenly stopped.

“The person called Omoikane is an important person of interest for the resolution of this case. If we start with Omoikane and secure the remaining three, the situation will work overwhelmingly to our advantage.”

Touko-san’s explanation concluded. Everyone wore a complicated expression, but not a single person raised an objection.

We changed location from underground to a small interior conference room, and Touko-san led the meeting to discuss the details of when to meet with Omoikane, which took about an hour. Sousei-san could also be found in the small conference room.

It was decided that I would be wearing a wire on Sunday so that Touko-san and the others would be able to monitor the exchange between Omoikane and myself in real time. On the other hand, it seemed that those related to the investigation would

absolutely not be allowed close to the food court, so that Kyouhei Hioka would not become suspicious.

I was nervous at having been given an important job. But more than that, I remembered with excitement that I played a role essential to the resolution of the case.

“In the worst case scenario, Sousei, please risk your life to protect Naoto.”

Touko-san clapped his shoulder strongly and Sousei-san snorted in dissatisfaction.

“Aren’t you gonna do your very best to make sure the worst case scenario doesn’t happen?”

“Of course. I think Naoto is cute too. I promise it’ll be perfect. It’s just that you never know what’ll happen in this world. I’m just saying to prepare for the worst and ready yourself mentally.”

Saying that, Touko-san bumped the top of Sousei-san’s shoulder with her fist. “Gonnn.” A dull metallic clank sounded.

I was the only person left in the small conference room. There, Touko-san said, “This is our secret plan,” and taught me a surprising strategy.

“If you’re in trouble, use the secret plan I gave you. The secret is to not hesitate. If you do that, that guy will definitely do what you want, Naoto.”

Touko-san was brimming with confidence, but it was a plan I did not want to implement under any circumstances, so I vaguely replied, “...I’ll remember that.”

April 7 In front of Yagokoro Station Yagokoro Junes Interior food court

The day specified was Sunday. The weather was clear. The current time was one in the afternoon. Even though the food court was inside the store, it was surrounded on all sides by glass and there was a clear view. The rows were lined with varied restaurants, selling everything from takoyaki and ramen to ice cream and cultural foods. It was peak hour, and the food court was bustling with activity

from the groups of boys and girls who were probably middle-school students, families, and couples.

It may have been because of the dazzling sunlight shining through the dome-shaped skylight like a beam of radiance. For a while now, my forehead and palms and underarms wouldn't stop sweating. My heart was racing, and my breathing was also a bit wild.

...No, in truth I knew. It was not because of the heat. I was nervous.

I was hyperaware of the gazes of the people around me. At first they only bothered me, but finally I began to be tormented by the twisted notion that each and every person was looking at me.

Touko-san and Tsuge-san had told me it suited me, but I felt that there may have been something strange about how I looked. That would be why everyone in the food court was sneaking glances at me. At the moment in which I thought so, I was tortured with embarrassment. I hung my head and

reflexively tightened my grip on the hem of my skirt so as to endure the pain.

I was in a terrible state. Until just now, I had just barely managed to stand it, but like water overflowing from a broken-down dam, I found everything about my current appearance to be embarrassing. I thought my exposed legs peeking out from under my skirt were the most defenseless, and, flustered, I pressed my thighs close and rubbed my knees together.

…Ahh, I really couldn't wear a sailor uniform.

Omoikane had specified a girl. I had consented to dressing as a girl for the purpose of resolving the case. Touko-san overrode my protests, saying, "You're the best choice," and I was made to wear the Yagokoro High School girls' uniform. However, I was unaccustomed to wearing a skirt, and it was just too much for me.

My embarrassment was also due to the fact that the skirt of the sailor uniform was shorter than I'd imagined. Every time the wind blew, my heart raced. The space between my legs was cooler than usual, and it felt as if I would catch a cold.

Generally, one would not go to the food court wearing a school uniform when it was not a school day. That was why I stood out unnecessarily. I wanted to give in to the urge to change clothes immediately. Unfortunately, the sign given to Omoikane for this rendezvous was "a girl in a sailor uniform".

The only choice I had been given was to “bear it.” To distract myself from my uneasiness, I looked beyond the glass enclosure. Outside, there was a red, streamlined sports bike and a pink bike that brought to mind the famous Italian Vespa. I relaxed somewhat upon confirming the presence of such familiar existences at the specified location.

“…Y-you’re… N-Nao-san…?”

From behind me came a weak, faltering query. I took in a small breath and looked over my shoulder.

A tall, slender man with silver-rimmed glasses was standing there. He was probably in the latter half of his twenties.

“…Ah, yes, I – I’m Nao.”

[Yay for untranslatable pronoun switches. Naoto starts with “bo”, about to use “boku”, her usual, masculine way of referring to herself; then she switches to the more neutral “watashi”.]

I started to use “boku” without thinking, and my

face grew stiff. It may have been because he noticed my slight slip-up, but the man's narrow eyes behind the lenses grew sharp as the tip of a sword. He was rather guarded, and so I endeavored to be as transparent as possible.

"Let me introduce myself properly. I am Nao Aoi, the representative of the Yagokoro police. Here is the proof of my status, a letter from the chief of police."

The man was nervously, restlessly glancing around at our surroundings, and at last he took a seat at the same table. Then he took the letter and read it hungrily.

"...I-I'm one of the administrators of the Midnight Site – Omoikane."

The man introduced himself, his eyes narrowed. We were meeting at last.

"...A-as promised, you'll protect me... I-I don't want to die yet..."

Omoikane revealed uneasily. To be honest, I was surprised that this high-strung, cowardly man could be an administrator of the Midnight Site.

“I-it’s weird, right? W-we were just the site administrators, s-s-so why do we have to be killed? Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!”

Omoikane yelled suddenly. It was so loud that his quiet voice up until now might as well have been a lie. The food court customers sent glances our way, wondering what was happening.

Omoikane’s shoulders heaved and he took several rough breaths. He was in a state of excitement bordering on hysteria.

“...Please calm down. It’s all right. The police will definitely protect you.”

I spoke to persuade him, and little by little, Omoikane’s breathing returned to normal.

“W-why do I have to go through this... I-if it was going to turn out like this I shouldn’t have become

an administrator… I-I don't want to die… I don't want to die…"

Omoikane did an about-face and began to lament in a weak voice, holding his head in his hands and collapsing onto the table.

I was completely astounded. What a selfish person he was. Everyone put themselves before others. Even so, he was the type of person who would go so far in his own interest.

I had received orders to take him back to the Yagokoro police station, but I was greatly perplexed at how to begin to persuade a person such as him.

Of course, it wasn't as if I didn't have a plan. But nothing would make me happier than being able to complete this business without executing the "secret plan" I had received from Touko-san. I sincerely wished for that. However, there was no other effective method, so I did not have the luxury to complain.

"Umm, please wait a moment…"

I told Omoikane and stood from my seat. I desired a little time in which to reaffirm my resolve.

As I obtained water from the dispenser, I mentally rehearsed over and over again the secret plan that Touko-san had authorized, which she had said would "win hands-down against a man." I doubtless looked suspicious: water was overflowing from my cup, but I paid it no mind as I grumbled under my breath.

Next I noticed, I was surrounded by people giving me dubious looks. In the end, an old woman I did not know asked with concern, "…Miss, is there something bothering you?"

"I-it's nothing," I answered, flustered. I moved away from the water dispenser, and clutching a paper cup with both hands, I returned to the table where Omoikane was waiting.

"…H-here. Drink some water and calm down."

In the next instant, the paper cup I had held out to Omoikane toppled sideways onto the table and its

contents spilled out.

“C-cold! W-w-what are you doing?”

Raising his voice unhappily, Omoikane stood from his chair. When I looked, his clothes were soaked with water. Immediately I knelt down at his feet. “I-I’ll dry it off right away.” I said, and began to wipe his soaked shirt and pants with my handkerchief.

“I’m sorry. I’m always a klutz, and I ended up causing you trouble…”

I told him apologetically, lifting my gaze to look at him. When I did: “Don’t screw with–” The man’s mouth, which had opened to issue complaints, uttered only, “Ah… oh…” and quickly closed again.

Without giving him a chance to respond, I clutched Omoikane’s hand in both of mine and pleaded in a serious voice.

“…Y-you might not be able to count on someone as clumsy as me, but even so, won’t you believe me? I definitely won’t do anything bad to you, so please…”

No sooner had I finished speaking than I tightened my grip on his hand. I snuck a peek at Omoikane's complexion. He was stiff and unmoving, as if frozen in place.

…Would this really be enough? I had tried my very best.

It went without saying, but everything I had said and done was as Touko-san had instructed. According to Touko-san, "If he's eagerly asked by a high-school girl in a sailor uniform, especially a naive one like you, Naoto, there isn't any man who can readily refuse."

I prayed and waited for Omoikane's reaction. If this didn't finally persuade him after I had acted in such an embarrassing manner, the regret from today would linger with me forever.

"…Y-yeah…"

In the next instant, Omoikane had placed his free hand atop mine.

“…Got it! Nao-chan!”

“N-Nao-chan?”

I looked at Omoikane again, taken aback.

Omoikane seemed suspicious at my strange behavior, so I immediately replied with an ear-to-ear grin, “Oh, no, I’m so happy you understand.” It felt like the muscles in my cheeks were twitching.

“S-so, Nao-chan, w-what should I do n-now?”

Omoikane unhesitatingly shoved his face right in front of mine. The narrow eyes behind the silver-rimmed glasses were upturned in a smile.

“…Yes, now I will take you to the Yagokoro police station. There is no place as safe as there. We have arranged the preparations for your protection, so please rest assured.”

Just barely managing to maintain my smile, I gently untangled my hands from his and stood. “P-please come this way,” I told him hurriedly and headed for the exit of the food court at a swift pace.

It was the first time I had been watched so enthusiastically by a man, and it was such a frightening experience that goosebumps stood up over my whole body. I had persevered thus far for the sake of resolving the case, but I surely did not have the willpower to endure any more.

Upon reaching the bicycle lot, I pointed Omoikane to a red motorcycle. “Please mount this bike.”

“…W-wait a s-second, Nao-chan… I-I can’t really r-ride a motorcycle…?”

It was natural for him to be worried.

“That’s all right. This is a state-of-the-art bike prepared by the police, the pride of the Kirijo Group, so it possesses an auto-drive feature. It will take you to the police station if you just sit on it.”

There was a limit to the absurdities that could leave my mouth. It was just that if I explained that “This bike is actually a robot,” it would simply cause Omoikane unnecessary confusion. I had requested beforehand that Sousei-san do his very best to

pretend to be a normal motorbike.

"...Keh! Why does someone as great as me have to let this asshole ride me?"

I will repeat this for emphasis: I had definitely asked that of Sousei-san.

"...Eh? H-huh?" Just as I thought, Omoikane looked surprised. "N-Nao-chan, did you say something j-just now?"

"N-no, nothing..." I smiled sweetly. "Maybe you're just hearing things?"

Saying that, I kept my smile as I kicked the red bike with the toes of my loafer. Once again, a voice came from the bike. "Whoa!"

"...W-whoa?" Omoikane stared at my face doubtfully.

"...U-um, w-whoa... W-wow. Right! Wow! Wow, there really are lots of people everywhere on a Sunday! Ahaha!"

[Actually, she turns "oi" into "ooi", which means

“lots/many”, and then turns that into a comment about how many people they are. This was the closest equivalent I got off the top of my head. *o*]

I lied, a smile spread broad across my face as I desperately forced myself to explain.

“I-in any case, please, get on immediately. I’ll follow you on this pink bike.”

Omoikane looked suspicious. I pushed his back and forcefully made him mount the bike. “...Remember this later,” I whispered briefly in a low voice so that Omoikane would not notice and let go of the bike.

“W-w-waaah! N-Nao-chan, h-help me!”

Immediately, Sousei-san, who Omoikane was riding, accelerated full throttle as if to show his displeasure. He took off suddenly, running toward the public road with terrifying force. I promptly jumped onto the pink bike.

“I’ll be counting on you, Ai-chan.”

I gently caressed the body of the bike once. When I

did so, I received an energetic, straightforward response: “Yeah! Leave it to Ai!” It felt as if my heart, which had been on edge, had been enveloped in pure white feathers.

Ai-chan, who was cute and honest. Sousei-san, who had a dirty mouth and did not listen at all to what I said. When I compared them again, I thought half-seriously, “…It would have been better if Ai-chan had been my partner.”

April 7 Yagokoro Police Station Interrogation room

Having accomplished my task of transporting Omoikane, I was relaxing in the director’s office within the Special Forensics Division as I drank the coffee Tsuge-san had made.

“…Hmph. When I look at you in a sailor uniform, I can’t believe I ever thought of you as a man.”

Tsuge-san said in an admiring voice.

“…Please stop staring at me. It’s embarrassing…”

Should I have prioritized changing clothes first over

unwinding and relaxing?

“I’m praising you, ya know? Like how delicious things should be savored to your heart’s content. So how ‘bout it? Why don’t you go out on a date with this old man right now, wearing those clothes?”

“…You too, Tsuge-san? Please stop joking around and teasing me.”

“But it’s not a joke. Well, I think the look suits you, and you’re the right age for it.”

I thought Tsuge-san was absolutely correct when he spoke of my being the “right age”, but I could not simply respond, “That’s true.” I felt that it would be rude to “my self up until now”, which had been spent as a boy detective.

I was aware that it was due to simple physical growth, internal changes, and an improvement in circumstances – those very small parts of me that differed from “my self up until now” made up “my current self”.

“–So this is where you were, Naoto. I was looking for you.”

Touko-san threw open the door of the director’s office and swiftly approached the sofa on which I was seated.

“I’m glad you didn’t change clothes. Come on, you and I are going to the interrogation room where Omoikane is.”

“…Why?”

I thought I had already completed my role. I became slightly worried that there was something I had done incorrectly.

Then Touko-san let out a disgusted sigh, scowling reproachfully.

“…Hey, I said to bring Omoikane to the police station, but I don’t seem to recall ordering you to wrap him around your little finger?”

I did not understand her meaning. I tilted my head, and Touko-san continued, smiling bitterly.

“Omoikane’s completely infatuated with you, Naoto. He’s being annoying and refusing to cooperate. ‘I won’t say anything if it’s not to Nao-chan.’ You really are a sinful woman.”

“T-that’s absurd. All I did was faithfully implement the secret plan I received from you, Touko-san…”

It shouldn’t have had that effect. Unthinkingly, I scowled at Touko-san, wearing a sulky expression.

Touko-san stared fixedly at me and did not answer. Perhaps she was insulted by my rude behavior.

“…T-Touko-san?” I asked quite fearfully.

“…Ah, I see. That face of yours when you’re wearing a sailor uniform is more of a turn-on than I expected. This really is troublesome. I’m a woman and even I’m tempted to do something to you.”

Touko-san unhesitatingly said such scary things with a straight face. In that instant, I felt a shiver run through my whole body, though I was not cold.

“Well, anyway, come with me. At this rate I won’t

have any choice but to knock out Omoikane."

"...Understood. Let's go."

Part of me was happy that I could be of use to Touko-san, but I was dejected that I once again had to play the part of "Nao-chan".

"...Ah! N-Nao-chan!"

When I showed up in the interrogation room, Omoikane grinned widely and happily. However, he sent a glance laden with wariness at Touko-san behind me.

"Ah, you don't have to worry. This is Inspector Touko Aoi. She is the supervisor and my older sister."

"Hello, I'm her sister," Touko-san replied bluntly.

Touko-san crossed her arms and sat in a metal folding chair placed in a corner of the room. I made sure of that before slowly lowering myself into the chair in front of Omoikane.

"...Will you tell me about yourself?"

I delivered the line I had prepared with a meek smile.

Even though this was the second time, I could not eliminate the embarrassment I truly felt. Rather, it felt as if it had only increased. This time, I was being watched by not only Touko-san behind me, but doubtless by many policemen beyond the one-way mirror.

"...Ah, y-yeah, I-I also w-want to k-know... m-more about you, Nao-chan."

Omoikane's narrow eyes behind the lenses of his glasses restlessly moved as if to hungrily take in every detail of my body. I suppressed my desire to flee from the room by strongly gripping the edge of the desk.

"Um... I... So you mean you want to grow closer to me. I want to learn a lot more about you today so we can become closer."

I suggested. Even I had to admit it was an awkward excuse.

“T-that’s right! F-first we should really start w-with y-you learning about me. T-that first!”

He agreed so readily it was disappointing. Tangentially, I did not want to imagine what kind of expression Touko-san was wearing behind me.

“…M-my name is Osamu Haida… I’m twenty-nine years old… R-right now I’m unemployed, but… I-if it’s for you, Nao-chan… It might be okay for me to do some work…”

It seemed he lived by running small errands each day and taking limited-time jobs. In addition, lately the users of the Midnight Site had been increasing, and the revenue generated from advertisements on the Internet had remained steady.

I asked about the motive behind starting the Midnight Site.

“…T-two years ago, I posted on a blog called ‘Slay Evil Immediately’ that was for sharing information on bad guys in town… I-I got lots of people posting back and the m-members i-invited me, and that was

the start of the Midnight Site…"

[Original blog name was "Aku Soku Zan", which is the same motto as Saitou Hajime's in Rurouni Kenshin. Thus I blatantly ripped the hilarious translation from the English dub. You're welcome.]

Those members seemed to be members of the current "Five Togakushi Judges", the four people called Uzume, Sarutahiko, Tajikarao, and Futodama.

The blog in question did not have the present-day "Midnight Site"'s degree of popularity or the juror voting system and consisted of an extremely small community. As for their activities, in only two years they had cultivated a famous site, so this suspicious man named Osamu Haida may have been a talented person with substantially more practical skills than could be guessed from his appearance.

I tried asking about his impressions of all the other members besides Uzume, who was no longer of this world.

"A-among the members, the most r-radical one is

Tajikarao; his favorite phrase is ‘This country’s police is shit. They’re too lenient.’ F-Futodama is a well-known hacker on the Internet, and he’s the core of the Midnight Site’s s-security. His w-way of thinking is relatively simple, things like ‘All the evil people should die’ and ‘I won’t do it if it isn’t fun’. S-Sarutahiko gathers the members’ opinions and l-logically helps them come to a compromise. H-he can be a bit high-strung, but that k-kind of person is needed in a group… H-he was the one with common sense…”

Listening to him, I felt that it was an unusually well-balanced composition of members. However, it was something of a wry thought.

In addition, his depiction of Sarutahiko’s nature was in agreement with that of Shirou Konno. It really did seem unmistakable that Sarutahiko and Shirou Konno were one and the same.

However, when I asked about Shirou Konno, Omoikane shook his head. “I don’t know him.” It

seemed he hadn't even heard the name. I asked if the members of the "Five Togakushi Judges" had met in real life, and he immediately replied, "We haven't."

It appeared that the members of the "Five Togakushi Judges" did not know each others' offline personal information. Seeing Omoikane's behavior, it seemed he did not particularly want to know.

I wondered if handling such secrets along with people whose true identities he didn't know was not cause for discomfort.

"T-there would be no point in knowing who they are… I-it's not like we're friends or anything. We're a group that shares the s-same ideology and goal of 'punishing sinners', s-so just as long as no one breaks the rules we decided on, there's no problem and we can keep w-working together."

In that way, Omoikane proudly answered the question I did not give voice to. I was astonished.

It could be interpreted as a way of thinking in which

it made sense to leave behind human relations on the Internet. Even so, I did not want to accept it. There were things that could not be conveyed and could not be realized without speaking face to face. I believed that, even if it was troublesome and complicated, direct dialogue between people should not be made light of.

I wanted to tell him "Your way of thinking is incorrect," but I swallowed down the words and conveyed our intention, that the police wanted to protect the remaining three people the same way as they were Omoikane.

"...T-the truth is there aren't IDs or passwords on the site, b-but there's a locked 'Reverse Chat'. T-that's where u-us members of the 'Five Togakushi Judges' communicate and answer each other."

Setting aside my personal feelings, it was a joyful matter that we had discovered a breakthrough we could use to resolve the case.

At Touko-san's orders, a policewoman promptly

brought a laptop computer into the interrogation room. We requested that Omoikane write a message on the "Reverse Chat" from that computer.

He posted a precise and thorough message prepared by the police, explaining the seriousness of the situation and that the police would take responsibility for protecting them. All that was left was to wait and see how the remaining three members responded.

"...M-make sure you actually protect me... I-I haven't done anything wrong... R-rather, the police should be grateful to us... W-we were j-judging the evils of the w-world in place of the police!"

In the next moment, I felt despair. I realized that nothing I said would get through to him, who stubbornly brought up the appropriateness of his own actions.

"Naoto, would you be able to say the same thing even if he's a completely worthless piece of shit?"

Mentally I recalled the question that Sousei-san had

at some point posed to me. My own powerlessness was saddening.

Omoikane wanted to speak with me more, but: "... I'm sorry. I'm feeling a little unwell, so please excuse me for today." I gently denied him and left the interrogation room.

To say that I was feeling unwell was not quite a lie. I was extremely exhausted. I wanted to go back to the dormitory and collapse into bed, postponing changing clothes and taking a shower until later.

When I exited into the hallway, Sousei-san was standing there in an intimidating pose, wearing an expression of displeasure. Perhaps he had been waiting for me to leave the interrogation room.

"...Oi, I'll give you a ride to the dorm."

I had thought unpleasantly that he would bring up the matter of what had happened at the food court again, but:

"...Yes, please."

Right now, I did not have that much energy, and I nodded obediently.

On the way to the dormitory, which took around five minutes, Sousei-san fumed endlessly.

“Oi! What’s that about? That bastard? He’s more a piece of shit than I imagined, you know? How could you stand it? If that old man Tsuge and Ai hadn’t stopped me, I would’ve smashed in that mirror and beaten that dumbass to a pulp!”

I laughed against my better judgment.

“Huh? What’s so funny, Naoto!?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing. I was just a little happy. I felt that Sousei-san was angry enough for the both of us, and the gloom that had pervaded my heart lightened immensely.

However, my heart once again grew heavy at Sousei-san’s words as he departed.

“...Hey, Naoto. Is that guy your ‘best option? Is there

really any reason to protect that little bastard?"

"That's..."

I was not able to rebuff him instantly as I had up until now. I was tired, so I could not explain. Most likely, a great hesitation had been born within me.

"No way a robot like me can understand the rules of society. But fuck, I at least get good and evil. Since I'm not tied down by useless bonds like you guys, I'm pretty fucking sure I've got a better idea of what good and evil really are. So if I had to say, that Omoikane bastard is a complete piece of shit. To put it bluntly, the world would be better off with him dead!"

Sousei-san declared and shook strongly.

"...That's much too extreme. In that case, you're no different from the people of the 'Midnight Site'."

At present, this was the main point sustaining me. For the police, the police and myself, there was a task we had to carry out.

“Duty is duty. I’m a robot, so if you tell me to do something, I’ll work for you mechanically. But! Just remember there’s a shitton of your feelings I can’t agree with!”

With those words, Sousei-san went back. All I could do was gaze at the bike as it was swallowed by the crimson sun sinking into the horizon. I had been unable to come up with a reply. That was because, like Sousei-san, I had much to think about.

As a detective, I had pinned down the truth behind many cases. There had been no reason to doubt my stance. Adhere to the rules and preserve order. I believed that was the best method in order to preserve peace in the world. I could not easily cast away the creed of “hate the sin, not the sinner”.

To try it out, I brought up the people important to me in my mind’s eye.

For example, if I had lost those important people due to groundless slander and the person responsible had been a horribly selfish human being. Even I

would not be able to keep a calm heart. There was no way I could do so. Most likely, I would burn with a strong fury akin to hatred.

If, at that time, my hand happened to be gripping a pistol and the target of my hatred was right in front of my eyes, if all that was left would be to pull the trigger – what would I do?

I imagined it as I looked up at the slowly darkening sky. After a while, I nodded confidently. "…Yeah. It's all right."

I would not pull the trigger. I could say it definitively. That was my pride as a detective.

April 8 Yagokoro Police Station Special Forensics Division

I was in the middle of eating with my classmates during lunch break when I received the message from Sousei-san that there was a post on the site's "Reverse Chat".

From what I heard, it seemed the post was from

“Tajikarao”, one of the “Five Togakushi Judges”.

I was itching to ascertain the contents of the post. I told those around me that I was very sorry, but something urgent had come up and I had to depart early.

When I did, I was cheered on by my classmates. “Do your best at work, Prince!” Now it seemed that my detective work was supported by all the students. I myself held mixed feelings as to whether this had been easy or hard to obtain.

I ran down the stairs, feeling that waiting for the elevator would only be a waste of time. Whose idea had it been? There was a sticker on the door of the Special Forensics Division office reading “Five Togakushi Judges Emergency Negotiation Headquarters”.

When I rushed onto the floor, I located Sousei-san and asked about the post.

“Right now they’re in the middle of crazy negotiating.”

Sousei-san jerked his chin at the huge screen mounted on the wall.

The screen on the wall seemed to be serving as a computer screen. On it was projected an image of the “Reverse Chat”. The large number of police and associates on the floor were enthusiastically staring at the post contents, and standing in the middle of that group and giving orders was Touko-san.

“Where’s Omoikane?” I could not see him in this place.

“He was getting annoying about some stuff so we tossed him into one of the office rooms. That’s just like Touko.”

Sousei-san snorted with laughter, and I replied with a bitter smile, “...I see.”

Taking into account his behavior yesterday and Touko-san’s personality, I could easily imagine that they would be naturally incompatible.

What follows are the contents of the chat.

Tajikarao: Police protection? What kind of joke is this, Omoikane? [12:10]

Yagokoro police: I'll be answering in place of Omoikane-san. I am Aoi Touko of the Yagokoro police's Criminal Investigation Bureau. [12:20]

Tajikarao: The fuck are the cops doing here!? What did you do to Omoikane!? [12:22]

Yagokoro police: We've taken responsibility for Omoikane-san and he is now under our protection. [12:23]

Tajikarao: You mean you went and arrested him! [12:24]

Yagokoro police: Tajikarao-san, are you aware of the declaration to kill the Five Togakushi Judges that was posted on the Midnight Site's bulletin board? [12:26]

Tajikarao: You mean the post written by that Kagu-tsuchi? [12:30]

Yagokoro police: Kagu-tsuchi seriously intends to

murder the members of the Five Togakushi Judges. In fact, Uzume has already been shot and killed by the person we believe to be Kagu-tsuchi. [12:33]

Tajikarao: So what? [12:35]

Yagokoro police: Your life is in danger, Tajikarao-san. Please consider allowing us police to protect you, like Omoikane-san. [12:37]

Tajikarao: Cut the crap! Like this country's lame police force has the power for that! I'll kill that damn Kagu-tsuchi myself! [12:40]

"...Hmph. We didn't come to an agreement, huh."

Touko-san spat out, annoyed, as she gazed at the screen.

"–That's right. Didn't he agree to talk to us personally? Don't forget to set up the phone number we prepared."

Touko-san ordered, and a young man who seemed to be one of her subordinates answered, "Roger," and typed on the keyboard of a laptop computer

with practiced movements. What the man typed was reflected on the screen on the wall.

“Okay! It’s our turn! Don’t screw up, you guys!”

Tsuge-san signaled the people in white coats. Seeing the researchers with their ears covered by headphones and the multitude of cables connected to an undisturbed phone, it seemed as though they meant to trace the call.

All the people on the floor gulped and waited for Tajikarao’s response. However, even after waiting several minutes, there was no reply from either the chat or the phone.

“…He’s pretty cautious.” Touko-san snorted unhappily.

Soon after, Touko-san walked swiftly to the front of the laptop, and paying no attention to the nervousness of the young man who was her subordinate, unhesitatingly squeezed herself in right next to him, said briefly, “I’m borrowing your keyboard,” and began to type.

The words appeared on the screen, and everyone on the floor simultaneously turned their shocked gazes on Touko-san. The words “You scared?” were on the screen.

Her provocation had an immediate effect. Not even a few seconds had passed before the phone’s ringtone rang out across the floor.

“…So simple-minded.” Touko-san allowed herself a faint, contemptuous smile. She took the phone and said in her usual calm tone, “Yes?”

“Oi! You bitch! Who’s scared? Who the hell do you think I am!?”

From the moment he opened his mouth, a brash, rude voice flowed from the speakers beside the screen.

“It’s nice to meet you. I am Touko Aoi, the person in charge of negotiations.”

Touko-san was completely indifferent.

“I don’t know what kind of ‘man’ you are, Tajikarao-

san, but you are aware of Kagu-tsuchi, the one who declared his intention to kill you."

It was common knowledge among the people gathered in this place that "Kagu-tsuchi" was the same as "Kyouhei Hioka."

"The person called Kagu-tsuchi is extremely sharp and possesses in-depth knowledge about the inner workings of the police. Furthermore, he is proficient at martial arts, judo and kendo, and is an excellent marksman. No matter how confident you may be in your physical strength, Tajikarao-san, unfortunately he's not an opponent that your average person can hope to stand up to."

His history of winning multiple awards was not just for show. He had been Touko-san's senpai and former lover. Kyouhei Hioka was excellent – that is to say, she doubtless felt more fear than anyone when he became an enemy. However, Tajikarao laughed loudly and cheerfully, not at all intimidated. "What about it!?

“I’ll tell you right now, no one in Japan matches up to me! I dunno just who this Kagu-tsuchi is, but in the end he’s just some guy in this country, right? If you ask me, you peace-loving idiots are all big babies!”

Of course, Tajikarao did not know that Kagu-tsuchi was Kyouhei Hioka, a detective. However, as a result of this ignorance, he was acting differently, in a self-assured manner.

“…If you’re going to make such baseless claims yourself, you’re just going to embarrass yourself later, right?”

She must have been considering many things. Touko-san dropped her polite manner of speech, perhaps because she could not tolerate speaking ill of Kyouhei Hioka.

“Basis? There’s a basis for it! ‘Cause I used to be – a member of the Foreign Legion!”

[外国人部隊, literally (a mercenary in) the Foreign Legion. It doesn’t specify but is taken to mean the French Foreign Legion.]

The floor was filled with muttering at the unexpected reply.

“I survived life-or-death situations with bullets flying all around me. You really think there’s anything in this stupidly peaceful country that can scare me?”

“…Heeh, that’s interesting. You know, I like strong men. I want to know more.”

“…Che! I said too much…”

At last, Touko-san had agitated Tajikarao and had draw out some personal information from him.

“You’re tracing the call anyway, right? Ha! What a pain! Too bad, I’m calling you from a pay phone! Anyway, I don’t have to rely on you police bastards if I don’t want to. Got it? Don’t bother me anymore!”

Tajikarao finished in a threatening voice and hung up. Without wasting a second, Touko-san, who didn’t even flinch in the face of that intimidation, began to give orders to those around her.

“Tsuge-san, science team, it’s your turn!”

“Okay! If it’s on your orders, Touko, we’ve got no choice! You guys! That backwards guy thinks we’re stuck in the last decade and can’t do anything but trace the call! Let’s show him the skills of a modern science department!

“D team, see if there’s anyone with prior criminal offenses who used to be ‘a member of the foreign legion’!”

“Roger!” The male detectives sitting in front of computers nodded.

“The rest of you, A, B, and C teams, you’re going with me on patrol around Yagokoro Station!”

However, at this order, those around her, including myself, had to tilt their heads in confusion. Sensing that, Touko-san soon added:

“…On the other side of the line, I could faintly hear the Junes music. Also the slogan of ‘Yagokoro Electronics’, the appliances shop in front of the

station. Most likely, Tajikarao was calling us from a public phone somewhere near Yagokoro Station. If I remember correctly, the recent injury case–”

“Supporting your comfortable lifestyle! Sincerity first, Yagokoro Electronics! Sincerity first, Yagokoro Electronics!”

[Magokoro ichiban, Yagokoro Denki~ Magokoro Ichiban, Yagokoro Denki~]

Though I had not grown up here, I had also heard Yagokoro Electronics’s catchy slogan in front of the station while walking around on my first day here, and it had remained in my memory ever since. The jingle “Every day’s great at your Junes! ♪” also went without saying.

“If you think about why someone would be at the station at this hour, there’s a high probability that it’s for ‘lunch’. If we hurry, we may be able to secure Tajikarao in front of the station. Question every suspicious person you see!”

“Yeah!” At Touko-san’s sharp voice, the brawny male detectives answered strongly.

I watched in fascination as Touko-san grabbed the suit jacket draped over the seat back and put it on in one fluid movement, then left the floor, taking with her a crowd of young male detectives.

“Oi! We’re going too, Naoto!”

Sousei-san offered a surprising suggestion to me as I watched Touko-san depart.

“...Why’re you looking at me so weirdly?”

“Well, of course I am.”

Thinking back on everything Sousei-san had proposed up until now, I only considered that he would choose to foresake Tajikarao, saying something like, “He says he’s fine, so I say we just leave him!” It was then my job to find a way to persuade him, or so I had thought.

“Huh? Of course I wanna go! It sounds interesting!”

When I inquired as to the reason, Sousei-san

answered gleefully.

“Let’s catch Tajikarao before Touko does!”

“…This isn’t a game of tag.”

Surprisingly, Sousei-san was treating the situation as if it were a game.

“Anyway! Tajikarao sounds pretty full of himself! He talked big when it was to Touko, but this Sousei-sama will see if he matches up in reality!”

The spectacle, the pot calling the kettle black, was somewhat difficult to describe.

“…Putting aside your reasons, it’s wonderful that you’re taking an active part in the investigation. However, you shouldn’t interfere with work at the scene. Please wait to act until after I seek instructions.”

Tajikarao’s aggressive behavior had given me much to consider. If Sousei-san had taken offense at Tajikarao’s rude treatment of Touko-san, it was not like I wouldn’t cheer him on. However, I was greatly

worried that this person, who was just as belligerent as Tajikarao, would do something rash.

“Shut up! I know! It’s fine, let’s go!”

“Ah, w-wait! S-Sousei-san, put me down!” As soon as Sousei-san spoke, he swiftly lifted me onto his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, rushed off the floor, and ran up the stairs at a ferocious dash.

It went without saying that I let a faint sigh escape me.

This person always did act as expected. I meant that in several ways. If I took my eyes off him for a moment, he would definitely run amok. If I didn’t keep a tighter rein on Sousei-san, I felt that I would be swept away like a village girl by a thief.

April 8 Around Yagokoro Station

I leisurely cruised down the public road in front of the train station on Sousei-san, who was in bike form. The threat of rain from the overcast sky mixed with my nervousness about the investigation,

somewhat dulling my own mood.

The day was half over and it was already afternoon, but there were many pedestrians around the front of the station. Locating an unidentified man among this many people would be like finding a needle in a haystack. My own method was to construct a potential profile based on the information I had gathered about Tajikarao.

From his voice, I believed him to be a man in his late twenties or early thirties. In addition, the volume of his voice and his personal history seemed to indicate that he possessed a muscular physique.

From his exchange with Touko-san, his personality was impulsive and belligerent. He probably chose a location where he could clearly see his surroundings. I knew full-well that it could come to blows if I approached him the wrong way.

In the end, what I had to pay special attention to was the unique aspect of his personal history, that he was a “former member of the foreign legion”. That

seemed to be the deciding factor in ferreting out Tajikarao from where he was hidden among the ordinary citizens.

Of course, contrary to Touko-san's expectations, Tajikarao may have already left the vicinity of Yagokoro Station, but this seemed to be a more valuable use of time than sitting around at the police station.

Several minutes after we left the police station. We received the first report from the science team led by Tsuge-san.

"Bingo, Touko. The results of the phone trace say the source was a pay phone in front of an Internet cafe near Yagokoro Station. The chat was also from a computer at that cafe. The analysis of the background sounds included the Junes jingle and the Yagokoro Electronics slogan."

It was immediately followed by the report from D team.

"In our investigation into former members of the foreign

legion, a man named 'Alex Brown' stands out. He is thirty-three years old. His nationality is Japanese. He spent eight years in France starting when he was eighteen years old. When he was arrested in relation to the injury case at the beginning of the year, he mentioned he was a member of the army during his time in France. We will forward the image on file for reference. His father is French of African descent, and his mother is Japanese, so he is of mixed blood and his skin is dark brown. His height is over two meters and he weighs over one hundred kilograms. He should stand out."

Upon receiving this report, Touko-san issued orders to each investigation team.

"From the information received in the report, there is an extremely high chance that 'Alex Brown' is Tajikarao. Therefore, search for and secure Alex Brown. A team, head for Alex Brown's home. B team, head for his workplace. C team, continue searching around the station and interviewing witnesses. Each of you give it your best. That is all!"

I checked the picture of Alex Brown on the smartphone Touko-san had provided. He was of mixed blood, but his name and his picture did not at all indicate that he was part Japanese.

As a whole, he was as I had imagined him, from his fearless expression to his physical build. I had not predicted his dark brown skin, but one could say that we had a good chance of identifying him from his defining features.

“Oi, Naoto–”

Suddenly, Sousei-san slowed and the bike approached the shoulder of the road.

“–Hey, isn’t that kinda like the ‘man’ going into the station?”

I directed my gaze to the dim station entrance under an overpass to which Sousei-san was referring. His back was turned, preventing me from coming to a definite conclusion, but the person whom Sousei-san indicated indeed had the corresponding large build. I could not rule out the possibility that it was

simply a “trick of the light”, but the back of his neck appeared to be dark brown.

I jumped off the bike, leapt over the guardrail from which the paint was peeling, and alighted on the sidewalk.

“Oi! What am I supposed to do?”

“Ah, Sousei-san, remain on standby. Please contact Touko-san,” I replied as I ran.

The person I was after was more conspicuous than anyone else in the hallways of the station. The man was so large that the nearby salarymen in suits may as well have been children, and his skin shone a deep chocolate color under the incandescent lights of the hall. He was an extraordinary match with the specified physical characteristics.

I gulped. I could not speak definitively without confirming his facial features, but there was a high probability that this person was Alex Brown.

I drew closer to the man, who was pushing people

out of the way and advancing down the passage like a bulldozer, and caught my breath.

From up close, his big frame like that of a bear was overwhelming. I should have been accustomed to large people because of Sousei-san, but though they were about the same height, their musculature was quite different. Moreover, it was not just that he was of strong build, but even with his biker jacket I could tell that his whole body was brawny.

I took a single, quiet breath and said:

"...Excuse me, are you Alex Brown-san?"

I projected my voice at the back like a wall of rock. Immediately, the man swung his large body and looked back.

I confirmed his countenance with my own eyes and was convinced. He could only be Alex Brown.

Then Alex Brown stared at me with large eyes and grimaced, answering shortly, "...You got the wrong guy." As expected, his reply was extremely brief,

and I hesitated to conclude that he was Tajikarao.

“I’m here on behalf of the Yagokoro Police. There are a number of things we’d like to ask you. Do you have a moment?”

I carefully spun my words as I examined Alex Brown’s countenance. In the worst case scenario, if he resisted with brute strength, I stood no chance.

However, after taking in my entire body with a single glance, Alex Brown let out a snort and wordlessly resumed walking. It was clear from his behavior that he had labeled me a fool.

I moved to stand in front of Alex Brown as if to cut off his path. Bringing my anxious heartbeat under control through courage alone, I made my decision and spoke.

“–You’re Tajikarao, aren’t you?”

When I did, the man’s feet suddenly stopped. The moment I checked his expression, my entire body shivered in fear against my will. He resembled a

black demon. The man wore a furious expression like a devil, looking down at me with such ferocity as if to kill with the force of his glare.

“Move! Damn brat!”

Alex Brown roared and swung his loglike arm at me in a rude action, as if brushing off a weakling. I promptly crossed both arms in front of my face and braced myself for the coming huge impact. I prepared myself for immense pain.

–However.

Contrary to my expectations, I remained standing. There was no impact. Even though I had imagined that I would tumble cruelly to the floor as if I had met with an accident.

“A r-robot…?”

Alex Brown let out in a surprised voice. I slowly lowered my arms.

“Oi oi, bastard, you’re joking, right? Tell me you’re joking?”

R
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R
И

In front of me was a familiar broad back, and that tall, black and red person had grabbed Alex Brown's loglike arm in a single hand.

"Is this all former soldier's got? Don't make me laugh! If all of them are like you, then someone as great as me can take on an entire division all by himself!"

It was the back of the person I could rely on most in the current situation. Even the impudent grin that I normally only considered to be arrogant seemed trustworthy.

Of course, it was only natural, but even as a former legionnaire, it seemed to be his first experience seeing a robot.

"W-what the fuck is this?"

Alex Brown pulled himself free from Sousei-san's grip with all his strength and took one and then two steps back, wearing a shocked expression. However, his history as a former legionnaire was not just for

show. After several seconds of discomposure, Alex Brown changed his posture, took a guarded stance, and let loose a straight right at Sousei-san with a speed that I would not have expected from his large frame. At once, Sousei-san twisted his body, and the rocklike fist just barely missed the tip of his nose.

“Hmph! Like you can hit me!”

Sousei-san’s tone was self-assured as always, but as far as I could tell, the two did not have much of a difference in ability. Sousei-san was the clear winner in terms of strength, but from his behavior, Alex Brown’s combat technique was obviously more refined.

In the next instant, many screams resounded through the station hall.

Somehow Alex Brown had drawn a survival knife with a blade over thirty centimeters long from his breast pocket. Seeing the blade, the surrounding people all tried to escape at once. In a single instant, the hall fell into a panic.

“I’ll turn you into scrap metal!”

Alex Brown glared at Sousei-san with bloodshot eyes.

“Ha! What an idiot! You think you can win against me just ‘cause you’re armed?”

They paid no mind to the chaos around them. It was as if the large man, the former legionnaire, was the only thing Sousei-san saw.

Did he not see the knife? Sousei-san casually drew closer to Alex Brown. That was why I clung with all my might to Sousei-san from directly behind and halted his advance. “Please wait!”

“What’re you doing? Naoto! This is the fun part and you’re getting in the way!”

If there was one thing I had noticed about Sousei-san from the moment I met him, it was his boastful attitude.

“Consider the situation! What will you do if normal people become involved and get hurt?”

His opponent was in possession of a knife. In addition, he was in an agitated state. If Sousei-san cornered him, I believed it could result in the worst possible situation.

At that moment, Alex Brown turned on his heel. He yelled “Move!” to the crowded hall and began running with an agility I would not have expected from his large body.

“Oi! He got away because of you, Naoto!”

“Don’t place the blame! To begin with, I thought I told you to remain on standby!”

“Fuck, I’m surprised you can say something like that after I came and saved you! It’s the biggest fucking surprise of the year!”

“All this talk is unnecessary. Be quiet and let’s chase after him.”

I left Sousei-san behind and started running after Alex Brown.

“Geez, you and Touko and Ai, why do all the women

around me have to be so hard-headed!?"

He gave as good as he got. Secretly I was glad that Sousei-san had come to my rescue, but I could not bring myself to thank him frankly, half because his resulting arrogance would be irritating and half to hide my embarrassment.

"–Is this Touko-san? It's me! Naoto! We've found Alex Brown! He is currently on the run and we're giving chase!

I opened contact with Touko-san as I ran. I also quickly informed her that Alex Brown was carrying a survival knife.

"...Roger. I'll have the investigators around the station head into the halls soon."

I took comfort and reassurance from Touko-san's calm voice.

We chased after Alex Brown as we were tossed about by the unpredictable movements of the panicked people. Fortunately, his large frame would

not slip out of sight, even among the crowd.

–Nonetheless, Alex Brown was clever.

He easily jumped over the turnstiles just like a running back in American football, shaking off the attendents' attempts to stop him and rushing onto the station platform.

He may have intended to board a train. In that case, he would be nothing more than a cornered rat, or perhaps a cornered badger.

However, Alex Brown's actions were beyond what I predicted.

"—The limited express train to Inaba is passing through on the number 3 platform. It is dangerous, so please stand behind the white line."

In the next moment, Alex Brown jumped down from the platform onto the track as vigorously as if he were making a touchdown.

My instant cry of "Watch out!" was erased by a deafening roar. All Sousei-san and I could do was

gaze, dumbfounded, at the moving train that obstructed our path. Finally the train passed through.

I held my breath and looked closely at the tracks. Alex Brown was not there.

Then I noticed a large black figure sprinting away on the opposite platform. If that was Alex Brown, he had successfully escaped, but I was truly relieved to see that he was unharmed.

"...That soldier bastard, he has a huge body but he's really good at moving around."

Sousei-san spat out bitterly as he looked at the opposite platform.

His physical aptitude was out of the ordinary and could not only be because was a former legionnaire. Even if several of the muscular young detectives seriously tried to go against Alex Brown, subduing him would be a next to impossible task.

I was powerless, and so it was only in times like

these was I glad from the bottom of my heart that Sousei-san was my partner. However, there was no way I would express my thanks. It went without saying that it would only cause trouble.

I was once again convinced. Alex Brown was Tajikarao.

Alex Brown's voice and Tajikarao's voice that I had heard conveyed through the telephone were exactly alike. In addition, it could be said that his reaction when I had asked "Are you Tajikarao?" and the fact that he had run away lent support to the theory being truth.

"...The entire place should already be surrounded by the investigation teams on Touko-san's orders. Alex Brown cannot have gotten far. Let's do a thorough search of the block."

Leaving from the other side of the platform, the rear exit of the station opened onto the pleasure quarter.

The area behind the station was the pleasure quarter. At present it was midday, and so it was

deserted. The only thing that greeted us was a black flock of unfriendly crows. With the ashen sky up above, the pleasure quarter resembled nothing so much as a ghost town.

When I thought of Alex Brown, who was armed, holding his breath in hiding somewhere on this block, the stillness seemed to be full of tension.

Several minutes passed as we walked through the shabby alleys. There was absolutely no sign of Alex Brown and we received no word from Touko-san that they had found him. In that case, I was beginning to suspect that Alex Brown was no longer in the pleasure quarter.

“Oi, come on! Soldier bastard! Stop hiding and get your ass out here!”

In the end, Sousei-san grew impatient and began yelling in the middle of the pleasure quarter.

“Are you scared of this Sousei Kurogami-sama? That’s a smart choice! ‘Cause I’m a hundred times stronger than you in a fight!”

Sousei-san's loud voice may have been a nuisance to the nearby residents, but I did not attempt to stop him. Taking into account the other's personality, I believed provocation to be a valid recourse.

At that moment, I heard a piercing sound from a back alley right next to a hostess bar. It sounded as if glass was being smashed. I thought it may have been a case of beer breaking.

["hostess bar" is what comes up in my dictionary for "kyabakura". it seems to be like a host club, except with female hosts and, well, a bar.]

Sousei-san and I exchanged glances, and Sousei-san quickly went ahead of me into the back alley from which the sound came. We jumped into the gloomy alleyway and found it to be a dead end.

There, the first thing my eyes landed on was a large black lump squatting on the asphalt. I immediately realized that it was Alex Brown's back.

Fragments of brown glass from broken beer bottles were strewn about Alex Brown, who had curled

himself up round like a rock, and the liquid contained inside had dyed the asphalt a dark color. There were still several plastic orange cases rolling around irregularly.

From the situation, it seemed he had panicked and knocked over the pile of beer cases while on the run.

“Oi, soldier bastard! You’ve got nowhere else to run! Just give up!”

“Please wait.” I immediately held back Sousei-san, who was in high spirits. “I’ll go first.” I implored him strongly with my gaze. Then, though he wore a dissatisfied expression, Sousei-san lightly shrugged his shoulders at me.

“…Brown-san. Please. Don’t run away anymore.”

I completely hid the anxiety I felt inside and spoke in as much of a gentle tone as I could.

“We are your allies. Please believe us. We absolutely will not do anything to hurt you, so please just listen to what we have to say.”

I slowly approached him, one step at a time. Then I realized that something was strange. Alex Brown had not so much as twitched.

“A-are you all right!?”

If, by any chance, Alex Brown could not move. In that moment, that suspicion crossed my mind. However, more importantly, the uneasiness that stirred within me was a predictor of the seriousness of this situation.

I knew when I rushed over.

The dark color spreading over the ground was not beer – the murky darkness was that of blood.

At the same time, I realized that the long survival knife was piercing Alex Brown’s fallen body, which resembled a beer barrel.

He had been stabbed once in the heart. I placed my fingertips on the nape of Alex Brown’s dark brown neck. Liquid clung to my fingers from the bare skin I touched.

"...Oi, he can't be?" Sousei-san asked grimly from behind me.

I looked back and slowly shook my head. Unfortunately, he had already died. I let out a spontaneous deep sigh.

It felt like a bad dream. What had happened in the few minutes in which we had lost sight of Alex Brown?

"...Kyouhei Hioka." I said that name thoughtfully.

Had Kyouhei Hioka killed Alex Brown, called Tajikarao, after killing Miyuki Midorikawa, called Uzume? If that was the case, from the lingering warmth of the body, Kyouhei Hioka might still have been near the pleasure quarter. But I was frustrated that I could not guess where. Not a single trace of him was to be found.

Kyouhei Hioka was clearly at the center of this incident.

However, I could not get a sense of his whereabouts,

like grasping at thin air. I could find neither hide nor hair of him. Even so, the unavoidable truth was that he was definitely killing the members of the “Five Togakushi Judges”, one after another.

Who in the world was he? He excelled in many things, and he even had the ability to perfectly carry out crimes on his own.

For example, I would easily be able to understand if Kyouhei Hioka was not a person but an organization. That was how little I could grasp Kyouhei Hioka’s character.

Though I had understood the relationships and criminal motives of many people, I was slowly losing sight of who Kyouhei Hioka was.

Chapter 5: Upheaval

April 11 Yagokoro Police Station Special Forensics Division

The results of the autopsy concluded that Alex Brown's cause of death was loss of blood due to a stab wound to the chest area. The murder weapon used was the survival knife belonging to Alex Brown himself.

Furthermore, inspection of the scene in the back alley where Alex Brown had died had found traces of a struggle against the person believed to be the murderer. However, there was none of the evidence necessary to specifically identify the criminal. The only thing we knew from the traces left behind was that the fight had taken no more than a moment.

He had murdered Alex Brown, a former legionnaire, all by himself. Moreover, he had easily overcome his opponent, a large man over two meters tall. That was the hard-to-swallow truth.

Just as I anticipated, the search of his apartment confirmed that the late Alex Brown had been Tajikarao. Upon accessing the Midnight Site from Alex Brown's home computer, "Tajikarao" was displayed. In addition, rough drafts of posts Tajikarao had written on the Midnight Site were saved on the computer.

From what we could deduce from our interactions, Alex Brown did not seem to hold a favorable impression of us. He was closed-off and belligerent, and his furious eyes, which seemed to view every person in the world as an enemy, were burned into my memory.

However, hearing his circumstances left room for sympathy.

From a young age, Alex Brown had not been able to effectively communicate with the people around him, due to his eye-catching dark brown skin. As Alex Brown aged and his body grew larger, he resorted to violent means to resolve that friction. As

a result, he had had countless run-ins with the police, creating a feeling of distrust towards them that continued until today.

He may have gone to France, his father's native country, in search of a place to belong. However, in reality, there may not have been a place for Alex Brown in France either. That he was a member of the Foreign Legion, not the regular army, and that he returned once again to Japan, could not be entirely unrelated.

By chance, he had been born into the gap between two cultures, and unfortunately, it had ruined his life. I was saddened when I considered what could have been had he been born under normal circumstances. Even so, I wanted to tell him clearly.

"You are mistaken."

It was common knowledge that the environment had a large influence on the development of one's personality. However, there were many people who achieved remarkable growth even in an unfavorable

environment. There were countless people deserving of respect. I could only conclude that the main cause lay within Alex Brown himself.

He should have fought without yielding to his environment. He should have struggled so as to make a place for himself. At the very least, it was not right to have taken the narrow-minded stance of actively denying others as a method of protecting himself.

For example, even if Alex Brown had been unable to do anything on his own, if he had had even one trustworthy person who could set him on the right path, I would not be feeling this regret.

Similarly, I thought fruitlessly that this sad incident may not have occurred if Kyouhei Hioka had also had such a person.

In truth, the night that Alex Brown passed away, a post went up on the "Midnight Site" that threw the Internet into an uproar.

"MY NAME IS – KAGU-TSUCHI. MY GRUDGE IS

BORN FROM THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CONDEMNED. TODAY I HAVE PASSED DOWN 'CONDEMNATION' UPON 'TAJIKARAO', OF THE EVIL GROUP THAT CALLS THEMSELVES TOGAKUSHI. OMOIKANE, SARUTAHIKO, FUTODAMA, YOU THREE WHO REMAIN, MY REVENGE SHALL CONTINUE AS PROCLAIMED UNTIL ALL FIVE HAVE BEEN CONSIGNED TO OBLIVION BY MY HANDS. LET US BEGIN THE COUNTDOWN TO YOUR LAST BREATHS. IN NO WAY WILL I FORGIVE YOU."

He had declared his intent to kill and followed through with it. The mysterious "Kagu-tsuchi" was now a hot topic on the Internet. The backlash at Kagu-tsuchi over his actions was already approaching the level of a social movement. On the other hand, there was a similar amount of intense criticism directed at the Yagokoro police, who were letting the murderer Kagu-tsuchi do as he pleased.

Among the "Five Togakushi Judges", two of them,

Uzume and Tajikarao, had been murdered by Kyouhei Hioka's hands. Though Osamu Haida, known as Omoikane, was being sheltered by the police, if they were unable to protect the remaining members, Sarutahiko and Futodama, their reputation would be ruined. There was the possibility that numerous top officers among the police would be fired.

I did not hold much interest in that bureaucratic aspect, but I felt that allowing a crime to successfully be committed right under my nose was shameful for me as a detective.

Sousei-san and I detected the past conversations at the place where Alex Brown's corpse had been discovered, as we had done for Miyuki Midorikawa.

"You? Kill me? Ha! See the difference between my body and yours? You think you can win?"

Among the many things detected, that line was the most worrisome. I could recall Alex Brown's behavior within the station corridor as he snorted at

my small stature and dismissed me as a little fool. I surmised that these were his words upon seeing Kyouhei Hioka.

At 172 centimeters, Kyouhei Hioka was of average height for a man, but there was more than thirty centimeters' difference between himself and Alex Brown, whose height surpassed two meters. From Alex Brown's viewpoint, everyone except Sousei-san must have seemed like a child.

I postulated that Alex Brown, who fought on the same level as Sousei-san, had been so easily murdered because he had let down his guard around his opponent. Naturally, this much of the analysis I could deduce from the information available at the crime scene.

Before I realized it, three days' idleness had passed without obtaining any useful information.

We repeated our appeals in the chatroom, but there was no response from the two remaining "Togakushi Five Judges", Sarutahiko and Futodama.

Did they not notice the appeals themselves? Or were they watching and waiting? From the personality of Shirou Konno, known as Sarutohiko, was it correct to assume that he was watching and waiting?

He was such an exemplary student that he was chosen as student council president, but on the other hand, he was a coldhearted person who objectively judged others as a member of the “Five Togakushi Judges”. He was able to wear those two faces without those around him catching on. It was not as simple as Tajikarao’s case.

Taking that into account, my current reasoning was that Shirou Konno’s disappearance was not involved with the case, but rather because he sensed danger and chose to conceal himself of his own will.

However, concerning the other person, Futodama, it would have been preferable to receive a reply. According to Osamu Haida, known as Omoikane, Futodama was the type of person who was brimming with curiosity. Putting aside the question

of whether or not he would cooperate with our proposal, I expected it would not have been strange for him to show himself in the chatroom, but I may have miscalculated.

Regarding the whereabouts of Kyouhei Hioka, the person of interest, Touko-san was playing a leading role in the investigation, but there was no particular progress.

Each day, wild speculation ran rampant on the Internet and mass communication concerning the illusory Kyouhei Hioka: perhaps he was disguising himself as a woman, perhaps he had had plastic surgery and was masquerading as a different person, perhaps he had an accomplice.

With no progress being made, a suffocating atmosphere began to permeate the station. The faces of the investigators were slowly becoming darker with fatigue.

It happened on April 11, as we drifted in that sea of helplessness. Something happened that should not

have been allowed to happen.

Osamu Haida, called Omoikane – was murdered by someone.

Osamu Haida had been sheltered inside one room of the police dormitory. Of course, Osamu Haida's whereabouts were generally kept secret and were treated as top-secret information among those associated with the police.

The first to discover the body was the dormitory caretaker. Incidentally, the caretaker had not known that Osamu Haida was Omoikane. It seemed she had been told that he was a new police officer.

As always, after eight AM on the eleventh, the caretaker made breakfast and waited for Osamu Haida, but no matter how long she waited, he did not come. When, worried, she went to his room, she discovered Osamu Haida, lying dead and bleeding on the bed. It seemed the door had been unlocked.

Immediately after it was deemed a crime scene, traces of an outside trespasser were found. The

autopsy results confirmed that the cause of death was hemorrhagic shock. The murder weapon was a gun. Most likely it had had a silencer attached. He had been shot only once, but the carotid artery had been precisely hit through the back of the neck.

In addition, from the type of bullet, which had pierced through the bed and remained in the floor, we knew that the gun used had been a Sig Sauer P230. However, it seemed the rifling marks were not consistent with those found in Miyuki Midorikawa's case.

The results of a full day's investigation revealed that an unregistered gun had been stolen. In other words, Osamu Haida had been shot and killed by a stolen Sig Sauer P230.

How he had come to know of Osamu Haida's whereabouts was a mystery; however, most were of the opinion that it was a crime that could only have been committed by a person with intimate knowledge of the workings of the police, and the

complicated expressions of the investigators indicated the reality that we had once again been outwitted by Kyouhei Hioka.

Sousei-san and I used our Personas and searched the scene for past conversations, but we were unable to detect any conversations from the time of the murder. Most likely Osamu Haida had been shot with the gun as he slept. He may have slipped into eternal sleep, not knowing when he had died.

In the middle of that night, a post from Kagu-tsuchi went up on the Midnight Site.

“TWO REMAIN. MY FLAME OF RESENTMENT HAS NOT YET FADED.”

It was brief compared to the previous posts. Nevertheless, the one-sided situation had us at wits’ end; from where we stood, we glimpsed in that brevity Kagu-tsuchi’s strong determination to “surely consign the five of them to oblivion”, and we were made to taste a greater despair than ever before.

At present, we could see no future besides the one proceeding just as Kyouhei Hioka had foretold.

"...Even if it's because he regrets his sister's death, for Kyouhei to go this far..."

As expected, Tsuge-san wore a grim expression, and he had little to say.

It was the same for Touko-san. She was not normally the type of person to say anything unnecessary, but more than usual, I was unable to tell what she was thinking. That she had been appointed to an important position in the Kyouhei Hioka disappearance case may also have been a primary contributing factor, but she may have been working at her job with more than the usual vigor because she did not want to harbor unnecessary thoughts.

I chose a time when it was just the two of us in the supervisor's office.

"Touko-san, what do you think of Kyouhei Hioka?"

I came right out and asked the question that I had been holding back until now.

Touko-san gazed at me wordlessly. I wanted to avert my gaze under the peculiar air of intimidation that she was giving off.

"...Will you not tell me?"

Even so, I did not look away. I believed we could not beat around the bush if we wished to break the current status quo. Even if that meant asking Touko-san a cruel question.

"I don't think this is the case, but... Do you suspect me?"

In the next moment, Touko-san's gaze had sharpened.

"...I'm asking because I do not wish to suspect you."

–Didn't Kyouhei Hioka have an accomplice?

That was the suspicion harbored by many people, not just myself. Moreover, if that accomplice was part of the investigation team, it would be

completely consistent with our absolute inability to grasp Kyouhei Hioka's whereabouts and how he was always one step ahead of the investigation.

"...How much have you heard?"

"That the two of you were living together."

There were several people who met the conditions of being former coworkers, but it was also true that there would be no one closer to Kyouhei Hioka than his former lover.

"...That old man's such a blabbermouth."

Touko-san gave a shrug of her slender shoulders, wearing a complicated expression.

"...I told you before, Naoto. It was a long time ago. There's no longer any special connection or special feelings between us. But Kyouhei is still an important person to me even now. Back when I didn't know left from right, when all I had over everyone else was spirit, Kyouhei was the one who raised me into a full-fledged detective. If it wasn't

for Kyouhei, I wouldn't be who I am today."

I caught a glimpse of the depth of her feelings in her sincere gaze.

"Did he speak to you at all concerning this case?"

At my next question, Touko-san sent one glance at the ceiling and whispered, "...He did.

"Kyouhei said he wanted to know the truth of his sister's death, and I told him to just let it be. Even if we know the truth, it won't bring back someone who's gone. I only gave him more empty words. But Kyouhei didn't listen to my advice. I decided to just keep an eye on him for a while. He thought finding the truth would fill the void left inside him by the death of his sister. Frankly, I was skeptical about how much he could accomplish alone, trying to find the truth within the anonymity of the Internet."

The corners of Touko-san's mouth twisted in self-deprecation.

"I was wrong. Once he went renegade, his

excellence worked against him. No… It might be more accurate to say that I underestimated Kyouhei's tenacity. Not only was he able to reach the truth of the 'baseless slander on the Internet' that caused his sister's death, but he showed me he could find a member of the 'Five Togakushi Judges', who would not have been found with the organized power of the police."

"…Could you be speaking of Miyuki Midorikawa?"

"Yes, most likely. He didn't tell me her name, but considering all that has happened until now, it must be Miyuki Midorikawa, known as Uzune."

Touko-san nodded.

"He continued to make inquiries of the students at his sister's school every day, and he set his sights on one female student who behaved suspiciously. Somehow Kyouhei extracted the truth of the death from that girl, Miyuki Midorikawa, and became enraged and completely unable to forgive those who had sent her to her death. It was unlike him to be so

obsessed."

Touko-san snorted slightly.

"It's not just the hatred a victim's relatives have for the perpetrator, but a feeling of worthlessness because he couldn't protect her as her older brother, even though he was a detective... This may have been the result of such complex emotions. I felt that the situation was becoming dangerous, so I warned him more strongly than before, 'Please stop being foolish.' But in the end, it's as you see. I wasn't able to stop Kyouhei."

Touko-san worried at her lower lip.

"...That man is stupidly serious and absolutely hates things not on the straight and narrow. He would argue with someone if he thought they were wrong, even if they were his senpai or his boss. But strangely, everyone loved him. He was that kind of detective, like a hero of justice. It's different than with me; I'm not so serious. I couldn't have imagined Kyouhei would go renegade like that..."

Touko-san casually brushed her bangs back. Her eyes looked sad, peering out between the gaps in her soft hair as it fluttered gently down. I thought that Touko-san may have harbored the same kind of regret over his sister as Kyouhei Hioka did, though she had failed to stop him.

"–So, how was it, Miss Detective? Did you find anything strange in my story?"

When next I realized, before my eyes was her usual fearless smile.

"...No. Nothing." I slowly shook my head.

"Huh? Is there a reason you trust me so easily?"

"At the very least, I am convinced there were no lies in what you just told me."

I could say so with confidence. Touko-san was not deceiving me; I could tell her true feelings from her honest tone and behavior.

Touko-san laughed as if she found something humorous. "...In 'what you just told me', huh. You're

as shrewd as always."

Naturally, there was still much about Touko-san I had yet to know.

"I have high hopes for you, Naoto. You might be able to do what I could not."

Leaving behind those words, Touko-san jauntily left the room. The warm glance she sent me as she went left an impression on me. That was why I was convinced.

–That Touko-san was hiding something from me.

Sousei-san came and took Touko-san's place in the director's office. "Oi, Naoto. Is there any progress?" As usual, he conducted himself insolently.

"Not in particular," I answered coldly as I used the computer. I was nervous because the investigation had reached a dead end, and I did not have the time to courteously deal with Sousei-san's arrogant attitude toward me.

He did not take well to my behavior.

“Hmph! Some great detective you are!”

Sousei-san stretched out on the sofa as he berated me rudely.

Sousei-san did not have a shred of compassion. He felt nothing even when people died. Sousei-san had held no love for the members of the “Five Togakushi Judges” from the beginning, and when Omoikane had died, he had reacted indifferently. “You reap what you sow.”

I gazed at Sousei-san, reflected on the screen, as I pretended to work with the computer.

The more I looked at him, the more I thought he was as different from me as could be, from our physical sizes to our genders to our personalities. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sousei-san and I were exact opposites.

Our respective beliefs were born from those differences, and up until now, I had come into frequent opposition with Sousei-san over our conflicting opinions. I thought it would be near-

impossible to form a good partnership with such a person. The fact that our Persona abilities had good compatibility was the sole saving grace.

However, it occasionally had its merits. Sometimes I gained new insights from someone who was my complete opposite.

“That Kyouhei Hioka’s more slippery than a snake. He’s like a ghost.”

It was unmistakably one of Sousei-san’s offhand remarks. However, in that moment, I whirled around.

“–What did you say just now?”

“…Huh? I said Kyouhei Hioka’s more slippery than a snake?”

“No, after that.”

“Oh, the ‘he’s like a ghost’ part?”

Sousei-san looked displeased at my question.

“What’s so funny? That’s how it is, right? Kyouhei

Hioka's name keeps coming up, but we haven't seen him even once."

My heartbeat accelerated and my thoughts whirled. Before I ascended that bright hope like a thread descending from the sky, I saw the grand scenery spread out underneath me. That was how I felt. I see. So that kind of reasoning was also possible. I had reached a new answer.

[Possibly a reference to Akutagawa Ryuunosuke's The Spider's Thread.]

"...It's just as you say, Sousei-san. He really is a ghost."

I repeated and nodded.

"Oi, if you figured something out, just say it."

"No, it's just that Kyouhei Hioka may be a ghost."

"...Huh? Naoto, you feeling okay?"

Sousei-san gave me a pitying look at my completely unexpected claim. This was important, and so after straightening up in my seat, I addressed Sousei-san

in a serious voice. “What I’m saying is–

“–Perhaps Kyouhei Hioka is already dead.”

With a surprised expression, Sousei-san raised his upper body from where he was lying on the sofa.

“Well well well, isn’t that just ridiculous no matter how you look at it? You don’t mean something occult like the Five Togakushi Judges were killed by Kyouhei Hioka’s ghost, right?”

“If it really is the work of a ghost, I give up. It would be best to call in an exorcist to resolve the case. But this is the work of a human, and that is my specialty.”

“So then who killed Omoikane and them?”

“…I wonder. Most likely an accomplice is involved.”

“An accomplice? Do you know who it is, Naoto?”

Immediately, I shook my head to hide the way I averted my gaze from Sousei-san.

“…No, not yet.”

In truth, I had an idea. I had just now connected the dots. However, I did not yet have enough proof to openly speak of it.

And also, more importantly – I very much did not want to believe it.

"Ah! Geez! I don't get it! If Kyouhei Hioka isn't alive anymore, then why? How did he die? Suicide? Or was he killed? And how long has he been dead?"

Agitated, Sousei-san babbled loudly.

"P-please wait a moment. I'll answer in order. But first, please do not forget that this is merely my conjecture."

Sousei-san stood right in front of me, scowling, and I pushed him away with both hands.

"...At most, this is only a possibility, but please imagine that Kyouhei Hioka is dead. Even though the murders have occurred, there is not a single witness who has seen the criminal. We can assume he, the former detective, has the advantage in the

beginning. Kyouhei Hioka has experience with countless cases, and so I believe he will have a thorough knowledge concerning the possible movements of the police. However, abnormalities begin to surface when you consider that there are no traces at all of Kyouhei Hioka, despite the murders of Uzune, Tajikaro, and Omoikane. I also feel that his existence is like that of air."

Then I recalled Sousei-san's "talk of ghosts" and a new idea emerged.

"Huh? No, it's not like we haven't seen any trace of him at all, right? Like with Miyuki Midorikawa. The rifling marks on the bullets that killed her matched with Kyouhei Hioka's gun. And he's posted as Kagutsuchi on the Midnight Site's forums a few times."

"It's true that those are promising clues, but in the end the bullets and forum posts are merely tools, and he was not necessarily the one behind them."

At my response, Sousei-san answered, "I see," and nodded, wearing a complicated expression.

“But what about the info on Kyouhei Hioka we got with our Persona abilities? Didn’t we find traces of him in the past conversations with Miyuki Midorikawa and that former soldier?”

“But if we keep in mind the condition that ‘Kyouhei Hioka is not alive’ and once again review those past conversations, something new comes to light.”

At my words, Sousei-san crossed his arms and stared into the distance. He may have been remembering the contents of the various past conversations.

“Take the case of Miyuki Midorikawa. Do you remember how we could not detect Kyouhei Hioka’s side of the past conversation?”

“Oi oi, there’s no way I’d forget that. But that’s because my Tsukuyomi’s ‘Past Reading’ power only detects the conversations of the dead. Then doesn’t it make sense that Kyouhei Hioka’s alive, because we didn’t detect his conversation?”

“…It’s true that was the logical conclusion at the

time. How thoughtless of me. I apologize. I was convinced that he must be alive because we did not detect his conversation."

I bowed my head, and Sousei-san let out an admiring sound. "Heeh."

"However, if you consider the possibility that he is not alive, like we are now, we can think, 'Back then, we couldn't detect Kyouhei Hioka's conversations because he did not say anything in those places.'"

"...Huh? Is there anything in the past conversations that makes you think so?"

There was a noticeably deep furrow in Sousei-san's brow. That was why I slowly repeated verbatim the words Miyuki Midorikawa had left at the crime scene.

"H-hey! I talked, right! Put that down! Are you listening to me? Say something! Why me! Why do you have to make me suffer! It's the Midnight Site's fault that girl died! And anyway she was hit by a train! She shouldn't have just gone and fallen from the platform! You reap

what you sow! Ah-------"

"...Are you kidding me? I'm a robot and you've got a better memory than me. Are you really human?"

"I'll turn those words back on you. Why is your memory so poor, Sousei-san?"

"Shut up! I'm a robot almost exactly like a human, not a computer!"

"It's the same for me. It's simply that having a good memory is an essential skill for a detective."

I cleared my throat quietly. This was not the time for unproductive arguments, and I resumed my explanation. "Take note of the first half.

"Just before Miyuki Midorikawa died, she said 'Are you listening to me?' and 'Say something!' in a harsh tone to the other person. Following that, from what she says in her confusion, I imagine a scene where she faces 'an opponent who does not say a word', who is looking down on her with a cold gaze and has a gun right in front of her."

“Well, I can see it too, but why…”

Sousei-san’s eyes widened as he realized something halfway through.

“…Oi oi, you don’t mean Kyouhei Hioka might’ve already been dead the night we went to the crime scene?”

“The possibility does exist.” I nodded. “What I propose is ‘we operate under the assumption that Kyouhei Hioka is dead’. In the end it is merely a hypothesis, and you have voiced your doubts, Sousei-san. I cannot hazard a guess as to his time and cause of death. In reality, I believe the probability that Kyouhei Hioka is alive to be roughly equal to the probability that he is dead.”

“…Huh? What the hell does that mean? Can’t you put it simply? So then what’re we supposed to do? I won’t stand for it if we just wasted our time after all that work.”

Sousei-san shook his head in an exaggerated motion like a Westerner.

“…It’s true that it may have been a waste of time. But since we don’t have any other clues at present, we absolutely must not overlook even the slightest suspicion.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m so grateful for your opinion, oh great detective… I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“Please don’t mock me.” I glared at Sousei-san reproachfully. “Sousei-san, are you forgetting that there are things only we can do?”

“…Yeah, I know. We’ve got ‘Personas’.”

Sousei-san grinned broadly.

“Exactly. Sousei-san, if we have your Tsukuyomi’s ability, ‘Past Reading’, we can confirm whether Kyouhei Hioka is alive or dead. This is something only we can do.”

April 11 Kyouhei Hioka’s apartment

It was inevitable that we chose Kyouhei Hioka’s own apartment as the place we went to determine whether he was alive or dead.

We knew from the investigation reports that Kyouhei Hioka's apartment was located in the suburbs of Yagokoro, and we traveled there at once, using Sousei-san's bike form.

We explained to the apartment landlady that we were from the Yagokoro Police Department. She wore an expression of obvious displeasure. "... Again?" Perhaps it was because she had interacted with the police countless times, but she showed us to the landlord's room, said "Drop the key in the room's mailbox when you want to return it," and departed, leaving us to our own devices.

"The hell's up with that old woman?" Sousei-san objected to the landlady's rude behavior, but it was a great help, for it saved me the effort of hiding the existence of our Personas.

It was on the third floor of an apartment building in a sunny place. It was a three-bedroom apartment with living room, dining room, and kitchen. The flooring was done in the Western style. It was quite

an ordinary apartment.

It seemed Kyouhei Hioka had lived here together with Kaoru Hioka, his younger sister, who had moved to this apartment from the countryside to attend high school in preparation for going to university. There were traces of the police's investigation everywhere. But the impression of the Hioka siblings' daily life together still lingered in the kitchen, washroom, and bathroom, causing pain within me.

"Well, it's not a very big apartment, so I could do it on my own, but there's no way I'll be satisfied doing it all myself. Naoto, you'll call out your Persona and power up my Tsukuyomi, right?"

It was discomforting that I had grown surprisingly used to Sousei-san's arrogant behavior, when he had been disagreeable from the very beginning. But, well, I was grateful that his way of going about his business meant he did not feel inclined to have a serious discussion with me.

“That was my intention from the beginning, even without you telling me.”

Naturally, I had come to adopt an unrestrained attitude in matters concerning him.

“Hmph!” Sousei-san snorted in dissatisfaction.

“–Come out! Tsukuyomi!” he shouted, facing the center of the room and holding his hand up.

At the same time, I laid my palm on Sousei-san’s back, supporting him, and whispered, “…Give me power, Amatsu Mikaboshi.” The words that left my mouth were firm, but the fact that we were about to “work to determine if someone is dead” weighed heavily on my mind.

The marquee on Tsukuyomi’s head filled with words as soon as we began searching. There was a huge number of past conversations. Sousei-san and I exchanged glances full of confidence.

The reason there were many past conversations was because there were “two people’s worth of lines”.

“B-brother, how’ve you been lately?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Um, like with work?”

“Ah, it’s the same as always. I’m busy. But I’m satisfied, because I can protect the peace of this city through my hard work. See? Don’t I say some cool things? Do you respect me more now?”

“Are you stupid? You only ever think about work. That’s why you won’t ever get married.”

“H-hey. No matter how you look at it, a lot of girls want to marry me, you know? A little while ago, a young woman in the traffic division asked if I have a girlfriend!”

“Was that all? No progress? You’re not going out with her?”

“...Well, you know, adults have got a lot of complicated things going on.”

“How suspicious. You had a girlfriend five years ago, right? Are you actually still in love with her?”

“S-shut up!”

“Uwah, you’re serious! You really do still like her a lot!”

“No, uh, enough about me! Wasn’t there something you wanted to talk about?”

“...N-not really. It’s nothing.”

“...It’s not nothing. If there’s something you want to talk about, don’t hesitate to tell me, okay?”

“...I wonder. Isn’t it too hard for you to understand the worries of a modern-day high school girl?”

“...No, if you put it that way, there’s not really anything I can say... well, just don’t hold back, okay? You’re the only sibling I’ve got.”

“...Ah, yeah. If there’s anything I want to talk about.”

The speech style was that of a young woman. This could only be a past conversation of Kaoru Hioka, who had been confirmed dead. The speech style of the other person was that of a man who referred to

himself using “ore” – and from the fact that Kaoru Hioka called the man “Brother”, it seemed there was no doubt he was Kyouhei Hioka.

[“ore” is a rough way of referring to oneself, generally pretty rude, and used only by men.]

“Be happy, Naoto. Bingo. Just as you predicted, Kyouhei Hioka is already dead.”

“…I’m not happy about this kind of bingo. I am only happy that this discovery will propel the investigation forward.”

The sooner we could resolve this sad case, the better.

“So now the problem is when Kyouhei Hioka died, right? If we know when, then a lot of the assumptions change?”

“…Yes.” I nodded quietly. “However, we’re still in the process of detecting past conversations, so we’ll think about that after we’ve exhausted the available information.”

“Hmph.” Sousei-san gave a slight nod and started concentrating again.

We detected countless of the Hioka siblings’ conversations in the living room alone. However, because it was the living room, they were all everyday conversations with no connection to the case.

“–At any rate, simply having confirmed that Kyouhei Hioka is dead is a good enough result.”

That alone made coming to the apartment worth it. In addition, by changing locations and continuing to use Sousei-san’s “Past Reading”, we would certainly be able to find the information we needed.

Once we had left Kyouhei Hioka’s apartment, we returned to the Yagokoro police station. That was to obtain information on Kyouhei Hioka’s favorite shops and places before he went into hiding.

“–Sousei-san. Will you please keep this matter a secret between the two of us?”

I murmured to the bike I was riding as it ran along the highway to the police station.

“Huh? You mean that Kyouhei Hioka is really dead?”

I nodded when Sousei-san asked me in a suspicious voice. “Yes.”

“I get it if you’re talking about Ai and Gramps Tsuge, but… you want to keep it a secret from Touko too?”

I hesitated briefly before nodding a second time. “… That’s right.”

“…Oi, Naoto, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Sousei-san’s voice momentarily sharpened. He pulled the bike to a sudden stop in the roadside zone.

“I won’t just go along with hiding something from Touko, you know? Tell me why.”

I could see Sousei-san’s seriousness in the way his tone had changed suddenly and his voice had lowered from before.

I had heard they were old acquaintances. Before, I had thought from the way Sousei-san acted that Touko Aoi was a very special person to him. But I was only now realizing that she was more "special" to him than I had thought.

"It's… Though he may be her ex-lover, I believe it will not be easy to tell Touko-san that Kyouhei Hioka has actually passed away…"

And so I lied to Sousei-san.

"Ah, I see… No, but she'll find out sooner or later, right? So instead of finding out from someone else, it's better if she hears it from me… But then, Touko's a woman even if she acts all tough, so she'll feel hurt… Maybe I should be careful…"

Sousei-san was honestly worried, not suspecting me of lying in the slightest and thinking only of Touko-san's feelings.

"Dammit! It's impossible! I'm bad with this sensitivity thing! You do it, Naoto!"

"...Yes. I will take responsibility for this matter."

"Okay! I'll leave it to you!" With an encouraging yell to the surroundings, the bike starting running again.

I was saved just now by the fact that I was riding atop the bike. I did not want to speak to Sousei-san face-to-face.

I was sorry that I had to lie to Sousei-san, my partner. However, seeing his faith in Touko-san, I did not believe he would be able to listen with an open mind to what I had to say.

–I suspected Touko Aoi.

If I said that, I would meet with strong resistance from Sousei-san. That resistance was not the problem. The problem was that I could not offer a rebuttal.

Even if I said I doubted Touko-san, most of my reasons were insufficient to support my deduction.

I did not have decisive evidence and I could not even imagine a motive. It was nothing more than that

Touko-san was the closest match of the conditions necessary to be Kyouhei Hioka's accomplice. Right now I was still working to gather proof and I did not yet have the confidence to tell anyone.

In this situation, I believed that it was too early to tell Sousei-san that I suspected Touko-san. I thought it would only lead to unnecessary strife.

So I persuaded myself, but an unpleasant feeling tightened around my heart.

–It was at that moment. The smartphone in my jacket pocket vibrated. I quickly grabbed my phone and checked the display. It was an e-mail from the station.

"…Sousei-san, 'Sarutahiko' is finally on the move!"

Sarutahiko, one of the two remaining members of the "Five Togakushi Judges" and otherwise known as Shirou Konno, had revealed himself in a public place. The location was one familiar to us – Yagokoro High School, where Shirou Konno served as student council president.

“Oh, isn’t this lucky? The bastard’s saving us the trouble of looking for him.”

“No, he’s not that careless. This is the worst possible situation.”

Shirou Konno had not simply returned to the school after going missing.

“It’s uncertain where he obtained it, but Shirou Konno is in possession of a ‘pistol’. Moreover, it seems he has taken one of the female students hostage and has barricaded himself on the school roof…”

“Damn, every one of those ‘Five Togakushi Judges’ is fucking insane!”

I too found Shirou Konno’s actions to be incomprehensible.

Just as Sousei-san said, it would be difficult to call Shirou Konno a good person. On the surface, he wore the face of student council president, but he was also a member of the Five Togakushi Judges,

and he could easily utilize both sides for his purposes. However, I found it shocking that Shirou Konno, who possessed the determination and caution to hide his other face from everyone at school, would take such hasty action as taking a hostage.

What had happened to change his mind?

"...In any case, let's hurry to the school."

The matter involving Kyouhei Hioka was also important, but right now, the current incident took top priority.

"Okay! Let's fly! Hold on tight!"

"Eh! What? W-wait–"

Without my consent, without any attention to the chorus of horns from the cars passing around us, Sousei-san drifted on the main street and did a U-turn. It felt as if I was about to be thrown off the bike by the strong force throughout my whole body. My insides grew cold. I was furious, and I struck the

body of the bike with my fist with all my strength.

“Huh? What? Naoto? What’s up?”

“…N-no, it’s nothing.”

Sousei-san was calm and composed, and my revenge led only to my fist hurting.

April 11 Yagokoro High School Rooftop

When we reached Yagokoro High School, the area was already in an uproar. Curious onlookers milled about, asking what had happened, and I did not know where they had heard the news, but people who seemed to be reporters were scattered here and there within the crowd.

It was forbidden for those not connected to the police to enter the school grounds, and there were uniformed policemen wearing bulletproof vests lined up neatly near the gate. I could hear the policemen arguing whether they “should send in the Special Investigation Team.”

It was an imposing sight that made me wonder if

this was really the school I went to every day.

“Excuse us.” As Sousei-san and I pushed through the people and neared the gate, the students, who it seemed had been made to evacuate the school grounds, simultaneously raised their voices and cheered. I merely greeted everyone quickly, but Sousei-san answered with an energetic cheer of his own. “It’ll be fine now that we’re here!”

“Do your best!” There were faces I recognized from the newspaper club among the students, and I could hear them encouraging me.

As we drew closer, my homeroom teacher emphasized with a worried expression, “…I know this is your job, Shirogane, but don’t push yourself too hard.”

I nodded firmly. “…Yes.” I was truly happy that everyone felt this way.

We received permission from the uniformed policemen standing before the gates like gatekeepers and set foot on the school grounds. The

premises were quiet and calm. I felt uneasy, as if I had become lost in an unknown place.

When I directed my gaze to the roof, I could see what looked like the shadow of a person. We passed the shoe racks and climbed the stairs, heading for the roof. As we ascended, the voice of an elderly man steadily grew louder. That voice, transmitted through a megaphone, was trying desperately to persuade the one who had barricaded himself on the roof.

The entrance to the roof was crowded with police officers, both in and out of uniform. I spotted Touko-san among them. I caught my breath to calm myself, and:

“Will you be quiet for a moment!?”

A shrill voice came from near the fence on the rooftop.

“You know! I don’t believe a single word of those makeshift promises you adults make! Don’t give me words, give me action! Don’t give me promises, give

me results! I want proof you'll guarantee my safety!"

The source of the voice was a nervous-looking boy with black-rimmed glasses who I had seen in photos in the investigation files. However, perhaps because of his lifestyle when he had been missing – no, when he ran away – he looked like a completely different person. There were black circles under his eyes, his cheeks were hollow, and his hair was unkempt. All traces of the former Shirou Konno, an intellectual so much an honor student that he had been chosen as student council president, had disappeared.

"…Don't worry, Konno. We, the police, will assume full responsibility for protecting you."

"Huh? Are you serious? If you are, doesn't that say a lot about your sense of justice?"

Shirou Konno's mouth twisted into a vulgar smile unbefitting of a high school student.

"You'll assume full responsibility for protecting me? Don't make me laugh! Didn't Omoikane die because you police were incompetent!? If you adults were a

just little smarter, Tajikarao wouldn't have died!"

Shirou Konno's expression was filled with madness.

"You're only good at bragging! Catch Kagu-tsuchi right now! I'm fed up with running away! Why is the world full of idiots? Why does someone superior like me have to be yanked around like this by rabble?"

His mental stability was on its last legs. His assertions were incoherent. These self-centeredness thoughts may have reflected his true nature, but it was quite removed from the kind of person I had imagined.

Hearing him speak as he pleased, the surrounding policemen gritted their teeth and tightly clenched their hands into fists to bear his jeering. It was surely frustrating. Nonetheless, we could not move. Careless actions would compromise the safety of the hostage.

Shirou Konno's right hand gripped a revolver that glinted a dull black. Though he was far away, I knew it was an automatic. The type of gun was – a Sig

Saeur P230. Beside him was a female Yagokoro High School student who had been taken hostage. Shirou Konno's and the hostage's waists were tied together by a yellow and black construction rope. In a cunning move, Shirou Konno and the girl he had taken hostage were standing on the edge of the roof.

In other words, he was telling everyone that, if anything happened to him, he would take the hostage down with him. For example, if an SIT sniper shot him, the hostage would tumble from the roof headlong into the ground.

"…S… Shirogane-ku… n… h-help…"

At that moment, the girl whispered in a hoarse voice like a mosquito buzzing. I looked closely at the hostage. I caught my breath at the haggard face peering at me from behind the messy hair. "…Ta-Takizawa-san."

The female student who had been taken hostage was the one who sat in the seat next to mine in class and was deeply connected to Kaoru Hioka's case,

Takizawa-san.

“I only have one demand! Catch Kagu-tsuchi! I don’t care if he’s dead or alive! Actually, the world would be better off if a murderous demon like him was killed! Anyway! I won’t release the hostage under any other conditions!”

Touko-san clicked her tongue quietly at Shirou Konno’s shouts.

“…If Kagu-tsuchi is a demon, what does that make you guys… You’re devils disguised as humans…”

Touko-san appeared to be as beautiful and cool as usual, but I could clearly feel a strong anger from the words she murmured as if they were forced out of her.

“All of you police guys! Don’t just stand around there forever! Hurry up and arrest Kagu-tsuchi! …I’m telling you, I’m serious.”

Saying that, Shirou Konno ground the muzzle of the gun against Takizawa-san’s temple as she sobbed,

“H-Hic… I-I’m sorry… P-please forgive me…”

In the next instant, Shirou Konno’s eyes filled with anger.

“…It’s not just a bluff… I really will shoot… Shooting one person’s not much different from shooting ‘two’, is it?”

Everyone was taken by surprise at Shirou Konno’s sudden confession, and the scene became an uproar.

“K-Konno! W-Who are you saying you shot…?”

The veteran detective in charge of persuasion asked the question on everyone’s minds.

“I don’t know! That person came to kill me, saying it was for revenge, so I just turned the tables. It was legitimate self-defense. By the way, I borrowed this gun from ‘em. Ah, they had a gun, so they might’ve been with you police guys. A police officer coming to take the life of an innocent citizen like me, what’s the world coming to…”

“…K-Konno, was this person a man? Or a woman?

Did they give their name? And when was this…?”

[Konno uses “aite” to refer to the person when he needs to, which is a gender-neutral “partner/opponent” type of word. Japanese doesn’t really use gendered pronouns, thus why the next paragraph asks. I couldn’t really preserve the ambiguity very well without using “them”, which is odd in English no matter how you look at it.]

“Ahh, geez, if you want to know! Then bring Kagutsuchi to me already! I’ll add more conditions before I release the hostage!”

Standing amidst the surrounding tumult of indignation, agitation, and various other emotions, I was convinced.

“–Hey, Naoto, the cop that bastard turned the tables on, it can’t be…”

Sousei-san whispered in my ear, as if taking no note of our surroundings, and I nodded slightly in return. “…Yes, there’s no doubt.”

It was valid to assume that Shirou Konno had killed Kyouhei Hioka.

Logically, wouldn't it have occurred after Kyouhei Hioka murdered Miyuki Midorikawa?

Kyouhei Hioka, who had discovered the Five Togakushi Judges, beginning with Miyuki Midorikawa. And Shirou Konno, who had had a close relationship with Miyuki Midorikawa. I could easily imagine that Miyuki Midorikawa had told Shirou Konno to beware of Kyouhei Hioka. If he had lost communication with Miyuki Midorikawa… Taking into account Shirou Konno's personality, it was inevitable that he would next take drastic measures to preserve his own safety. Running away could then be considered the first of Shirou Konno's countermeasures.

"Ahh, why did this have to happen to me… Dammit, dammit, it's all over… Everything's all messed up…"

Shirou Konno gazed at the barrel of the gun and grumbled in a whisper. He was in a dangerous

mental state. If we did not deal with the situation promptly, I could well imagine the worst-case scenario, that he would reach his limit and go wild, taking Takizawa-san along with him.

Be that as it may, there was no way the police would acquiesce to his demands. At any rate, the police had not yet even found traces of Kyouhei Hioka, believed to be Kagu-tsuchi. In addition, Shirou Konno's unexpected, sudden confession that he "shot someone who was a police officer" had thrown those around us into extreme turmoil.

–Perhaps Kagu-tsuchi was already before us. That was what I thought as I sent a sidelong glance at the cool beauty who was scowling silently at Shirou Konno.

But my current priority was Takizawa-san. I looked at her as she continued to tremble slightly; the mental rather than physical strain seemed to be the more extreme.

After my short moment of indecision – I took

advantage of the confusion to jump out onto the roof.

“Shirou Konno! I have a proposal for you!”

The sun sinking behind the capsule-shaped water tank left a dark shadow on the concrete floor. Of course, there was no one else around me. I was alone. Before me stood Shirou Konno. There was no place to take cover.

“W-What? Naoto! What’re you doing!?”

Sousei-san’s yell came from behind me. I let the additional warnings raining on me simultaneously from those associated with the police slide right past me; I already knew well enough myself.

I confirmed that Shirou Konno had slowly lifted his face and registered my presence with hollow eyes before continuing.

“I am Shirogane. This spring, I transferred into Yagokoro High School as a third-year. Please take me as a hostage instead of that girl.”

A commotion arose among the police as they heard

my words.

“…You look familiar… Oh yeah, you’re the rumored Detective Prince?”

Shirou Konno narrowed his eyes in an open display of wariness.

I was well aware that I was grandstanding. However, I had not thought I would receive permission through negotiations. Even had I been given permission, I did not know how long I would have had to wait, with the situation in its current state of confusion.

“Look. She is already at her limit. Please release her.”

At my words, Shirou Konno sent the girl a sideways glance. Takizawa-san’s face was pale and she would not stop trembling.

“I am accustomed to these situations. As a detective, I am well-known to the police, and I believe I can be of help in the negotiations later on.”

There was no more time to waste for Takizawa-san. Any further pressure on her would likely cause irreparable damage to her spirit.

I took off my jacket so that I was wearing only a single shirt. Next I turned out my pockets and showed them to Shirou Konno. “As you can see, I am unarmed.”

“A-a woman?” Shirou Konno looked closely at me, suspicious. His gaze was focused on the curves of my chest.

“…Yes, I’m a woman,” I immediately responded.

I was being sarcastic. I didn’t want to be looked down upon by the adults around me, so I had, up until now, gone out of my way to avoid admitting that I was a woman at the scene of an investigation. That being said, it was possible that he would let down his guard if he were aware that I was female, and so I actively asserted that fact.

Shirou Konno was silently studying me from head to toe. His gaze, full of suspicion, crawled slowly over

me like a slug, and I felt as if I would let out a shriek of disgust.

"...That's fine. Come here."

Somehow it seemed that I had pleased him.

"...But if you act even a little bit weird – I'll shoot without mercy."

I nodded sharply and moved slowly toward Shirou Konno. My feet were leaden as I stepped forward.

If I made any imprudent movements, this man would not hesitate to pull the trigger. I could not assume any leeway in the handling of Shirou Konno just because his self-assurance was turning into desperation. The slightest incentive could cause him to blow his top.

I carefully walked forward until I was beside Takizawa-san.

"...It's all right now," I whispered, and perhaps Takizawa-san calmed down, because her knees suddenly gave out under her and she sank to the

concrete floor. Flustered, I propped up the dazed girl as she kneeled on the pavement.

“Untie the rope around that girl’s waist and tie it around yourself.”

Shirou Konno looked down at me and ordered oppressively. The gun’s barrel was pointed at the back of my head. I nodded without looking at the gun and did as Shirou Konno ordered, untying the yellow and black rope from around Takizawa-san’s waist.

To be honest, I had no plan for what would come after becoming a hostage. In any case, I believed that rescuing Takizawa-san took precedence.

However, now that I was near Shirou Konno, I thought that perhaps the opportunity to persuade him would arise. In addition, I had Sousei-san. There was still much friction between us, but I had full faith in Touko-san’s ability to handle incidents at the scene.

…It happened just as I finished untying the rope – a

single gunshot echoed across the roof and into the reddish sky above.

Suddenly, a warm “something” touched my cheek. When I reached up and touched my skin, a sticky liquid redder than the sunset clung to my fingertips. Thinking that I had been shot, my entire body stiffened. However, I did not hurt anywhere. I promptly lifted my head.

Before me, Shirou Konno’s eyes were wide with shock and he was standing stock-still. In the next moment, the gun tumbled from his hand and made a dry noise as it fell on the concrete.

–Then, with his eyes still wide open, Shirou Konno slumped over slowly and fell face-first on the floor. The dull crack of a human body hitting concrete echoed across the roof.

When I looked, there were purplish-red traces of a bullet’s scorch marks on Shirou Konno’s temple, and a fan-shaped stain the color of a ripened tomato thrown against a wall was spreading out across the

gray floor.

I realized that there was deep shadow as long as a cypress at my feet. Flustered, I turned around. The smell of gunpowder assaulted my nostrils, accompanied by gray smoke which rose up from a dark hole – standing there was a woman in a daunting pose, both hands grasping a revolver. There was only that one person, her face expressionless.

At once, I felt anger well up from the depths of my heart, and I opened my mouth to shout that woman's name at the top of my lungs. However, faster than I could give it voice, my words were lost amidst the shouts of the surrounding police, though whether they were screams or roars of anger, I could not tell.

At last, she quietly lowered the gun she held and turned on her heel, facing the police gathered at the entrance to the rooftop.

"–As the one in charge here, I am proud to have

chosen the best course of action. If you insist on saying my actions in this matter were mistaken, resign yourself and accept your punishment."

Everyone wore complicated expressions as they gazed at Touko-san. However, no one was able to say a word. Most likely, no one could fathom what had just happened.

Were her actions excessive or justified?

It was not a simple question. We would not have an answer until the time was right. Along those lines, all I could do was mutter dumbfoundedly, "Why?", as I continued to glare at her.

April 11 Yagokoro High School In front of the main gate

Several hours had passed since the "hostage barricade incident". The sunlight had waned and the campus was beginning to be enveloped in the shrouds of night.

Most of the police had disappeared, save for a few

who remained to conduct the crime scene investigation. There was to be a press conference tonight on the incident at the Yagokoro police office, and so the reporters had already departed. The bystanders had left before the sun set. Similarly, there was no passing traffic.

I was the only one still standing in front of the now-deserted school gates.

"...How long are you gonna stay at school? Is there something for us to do here?"

All save for the person who had ignored my words to "Go on ahead."

"If there's something we should do, isn't it to gather up info from Shirou Konno's past conversations with my great Tsukuyomi and your Amatsu-Mikaboshi?"

Sousei-san's opinion was correct. Up until now, I had unhesitatingly chosen to take action in situations in which I could use my Persona. However, the circumstances had been significantly different.

“Well, in that case, there’s a reason for us to stay at this school, where Shirou Konno was student council president. But it’s weird. It doesn’t look like you want to try at all. I really don’t get you.”

Sousei-san bent over and peered at me doubtfully as I stood motionless, leaning my back against the brickwork gate.

“…I told you to please go on ahead, didn’t I? I am waiting to attend to personal business.”

“…Waiting? For who?”

I was startled by Sousei-san’s inquiry.

“…Isn’t that why I said it’s personal? Please excuse me, but won’t you leave me alone?”

I was fully aware that I was speaking rudely, but to be frank, I did not want Sousei-san to witness the scene that was about to occur. Half of me thought he would be a bother and half of me felt guilty for lying to him.

“Don’t be stupid! There’s no way I can leave you

alone when you're like this, Naoto!"

Sousei-san yelled.

"...Haven't you figured it out yet? You're definitely acting weird, you know?"

I stared at Sousei-san inadvertently. As I wordlessly looked at him, Sousei-san's eyebrows knit in confusion. "W-What? What're you looking at?"

"...Could it be that you're worried about me?"

"W-Wha? Not really! I'm not worried or anything! I'm just yelling at you to pull yourself together!"

Sousei-san was more shaken than I had expected. That was why I responded disinterestedly, "Really..." This would really be a troublesome time for him to act kind. The "guilt" within me won out slightly over the thought that he would be a bother.

"I am waiting... For Touko-san to come..."

I admitted to Sousei-san only one of the truths behind my feeling of guilt.

“Oh, I get it! It’s Touko! There’s a lot you have to talk about with her!”

Sousei-san nodded, satisfied.

“Ah, but then, why were you keeping it secret from me? If you’re just meeting Touko, it’s not like there’s anything wrong with having me along, right?”

“…Haa.” Though I answered ambiguously, Sousei-san inclined his head.

There was a great deal wrong, but now there was no way for me to easily drive away Sousei-san. I could only give up. He would find out eventually, and I was only delaying the inevitable.

Suddenly, I realized that several dozen shadows were leaving through the front door of the school building. They were the police and their associates, with Touko-san walking at the head of the group. I immediately rushed over to Touko-san.

Touko-san took in my expression and stopped walking in the middle of the path leading to the gate.

"...You return to the office first," she ordered the subordinate detectives.

The detectives bowed, saying, "Then we'll see you later," and disappeared. The only three left on the path between the school building and the gate were Sousei-san, Touko-san, and me.

Touko-san and I stood in the center of the path, gazing wordlessly at each other.

"...You have your cute side too, Naoto, waiting for me to finish work."

Touko-san was the first to break the silence. She smiled a little as she drew closer to me.

"Please stop acting so transparent!"

I cried out roughly as I faced Touko-san. From the beginning, I had had no intention of holding back. I no longer had any need to delve into her motives. Touko-san did not look surprised. She regarded me calmly as I glared at her.

"...Oi, what's all this about, Naoto? Why are you

suddenly mad at Touko?"

The only one surprised was Sousei-san, who knew nothing. Sousei-san stared at Touko-san and I in turn.

"Back then! Why did you shoot Shirou Konno?"

I continued, paying no mind to Sousei-san.

"Are you forgetting what I said on the roof, Naoto? I was in charge of this situation, and I judged shooting Shirou Konno to be the best course of action."

"Was it necessary to kill him!?"

"You're speaking in hindsight."

"You're lying!" I immediately shook my head. "Touko-san, you have the skill to hit your opponent's temple with a single shot. It should not have been difficult to shoot his revolver, arm, or leg, such that you would not inflict a fatal wound."

"It was my only chance. What if I had missed and Shirou Konno had had the chance for a counterattack? And if you had been in danger,

Naoto? If you think about it like that, there was no way I would hesitate to kill him."

"...Why did you have to choose that moment to shoot?"

"Are you saying there would have been a better time to kill Shirou Konno than when the rope wasn't tied around the hostage?"

Touko-san snorted with laughter.

"That's not the point! I'm asking why you did not allow me the chance to persuade him! There's no way you could have misunderstood my intentions. Wouldn't it have been all right just to wait and see? Can you not trust me?"

"I'm afraid you're forgetting something. In the first place, who was it that got you involved in this case, Naoto? Who was it that often assigns you to an important role in this case? It was all because of me, wasn't it? I'm upset that you think I don't trust you. No one trusts you more than me, Naoto."

I could not detect any wavering in Touko-san's gaze. On the contrary, she was full of confidence.

–Why was that? She should have some inkling of the ugly truth I was about to reveal to her. For this reason, I had waited until everyone was gone and she was the only person left.

In the next moment, Sousei-san gripped my shoulders so hard it hurt.

"Oi! Naoto! Cut that out! There's no fucking reason to treat Touko like that! I don't think her judgment was wrong. No one can complain about Shirou Konno getting shot. You get that much, right?"

"That's right, Naoto. Konno's death was the proper punishment for his sins. That man performed such vile acts as taking a hostage and menacing her with a gun. On top of that, he confessed to unhesitatingly having shot a police officer. You heard them too, right, Naoto? All of his rude remarks? Could you believe them? On top of that, wasn't that man, in that situation, only thinking about himself, that he'd

done nothing wrong and he was so unfortunate?"

Touko-san suddenly extended her finger and softly touched my cheek.

"There was no way I would put you in danger for that complete bastard's sake, Naoto!"

Unusually, Touko-san raised her voice.

"Yeah! That's right, Naoto! Touko saved your life. This is where you're supposed to lower your head and bow. Or are you still gonna insist stupidly that that shitty bastard deserved to live?"

Immediately, I shook my head emphatically and brushed away Sousei-san's and Touko-san's hands at the same time.

"I know that! Shirou Konno was a warped individual! I know that Miyuki Midorikawa and Alex Brown and Osamu Haida all had twisted ways of thinking!"

"...W-What's up? Naoto? We're talking about Konno now, aren't we? You're right, but they've got

nothing to do with this, right?"

Sousei-san pressed me for answers, but right now, I only had eyes for Touko-san.

"However, even so, it's wrong to think that they had to die. I am not saying that just to sound good. I'm trying to say that our duty remains the same no matter what kind of person we face, the duty of detectives like me and police like you, Touko-san."

I took a single deep breath and told Touko-san straight-out.

"...Touko-san – you are 'Kagu-tsuchi', aren't you?"

In the next moment, the one who spoke was of course that person.

"...Haa? Why you! Don't screw around! Naoto! What the hell are you doing? What the fuck are you thinking, suspecting Touko like this?"

Sousei-san grabbed me by the collar with both hands. He was so forceful it seemed he would strike me. However, my gaze still did not leave Touko-san.

“…Sousei. Let go of Naoto.”

Touko-san said quietly. She regarded me without so much as raising an eyebrow. Her gaze showed not a hint of agitation; rather, it was even calmer than usual.

“…Huh? Why? Are you fine with Naoto treating you like a damn criminal, Touko? I won’t fucking forgive you for doubting Touko, even if you’re joking!”

“It’s fine. Let go of her.”

“But!”

“…Sousei. Can’t you hear me?”

At that moment, Touko-san’s gaze pierced Sousei-san like a needle.

“…Che… Got it.”

Sousei-san shook his hands off me roughly. “There’s a good boy.” Touko-san’s attitude was overbearing, but she regarded me much as an older sister would a disobedient younger brother.

“Will you explain your reasoning to me?”

Touko-san faced me once again.

“Why you think I’m ‘Kagu-tsuchi’.”

“…You don’t think my claim is absurd, as Sousei-san does?”

As I made to fix the collar of my dishevelled shirt, I surreptitiously examined Touko-san’s expression. I had my doubts. Touko-san was unusually composed.

As a detective, I had just exposed her secrets. No matter how strong her nerves, it would be in my favor if she showed even a hint of agitation.

“It’s like I said before. No one trusts you more than me, Naoto.”

Touko-san’s lips curved upward as she spoke. Seeing that small smile confirmed it for me. Most likely, Touko-san “knew”.

“You’re not about to tell me there’s no reason for it?”

“That’s a foolish question.”

When I replied to Touko-san’s claim, I was bluffing, but I did my best to force a smile. I was about to shatter everything between us. I resolved to do so.

“The reason I suspect you to be Kagu-tsuchi – is because the one we believed to be the most likely suspect, Kyouhei Hioka, is already dead.”

This was a new fact we had only obtained today and of course had not yet reported to Touko-san. As expected, Touko-san lifted her eyebrows high in surprise at the fact that I knew. Her eyes were asking, “How do you know that?”

However, the wavering was only momentary. For some reason, Touko-san began nodding in satisfaction.

“…I see. Using Sousei’s ‘Past Reading’ and Naoto’s ‘Ability Tune’ Persona abilities, you figured out that Kyouhei is no longer of this world.”

I knew from the way she said it.

“Touko-san, you really did know Kyouhei Hioka is already dead.”

Touko-san didn’t answer, only smiled self-deprecatingly. It seemed to me a terribly sad smile.

“Naoto, when did you first think I was suspicious?”

“It started with the case of Alex Brown, known as Tajikarao.”

I recalled the events that occurred in the back alley of the pleasure quarter.

“At that time, Sousei-san and I chased him, but we failed to catch him. Then when we found him again several minutes later, he was already dead. I acknowledge that failing to catch him was an error on our part. However, Kyouhei Hioka had to have been truly skilled to murder Alex Brown in the space of a few short minutes; furthermore, he snuck through the net the police had set up and didn’t leave any significant clues. Of course, that would be

if Kyouhei Hioka really was the perpetrator…”

I slowly spoke of the circumstances at that time and my own thoughts.

“The first doubt I had was ‘Would he be able to commit such a difficult crime on his own?’ The same could be asked about the case of Osamu Haida, known as Omoikane.”

For example, even if Kyouhei Hioka knew the arrangement of the rooms in the police dormitory, his face was known, and it was not a place he could readily enter.

“At that time, I suspected the existence of an ‘accomplice’ more strongly than before. When I thought about what kind of accomplice was most likely and fit the conditions, I deduced that it could only be someone associated with the police. In addition, they would ideally have ties to the ‘Yagokoro High School student disappearance case’. In that case, if he had the guidance of such an accomplice, I believed it would not be unlikely that

he could carry out two such difficult crimes."

"So, you're saying that I could be one of those accomplices?"

"Yes. Just looking at the circumstances, he has other coworkers and detectives who are his kouhai. But by chance, I heard from Tsuge-san that Kyouhei Hioka and you are ex-lovers and lived together at one time, and you became the most likely candidate."

There was no way I could stay cool. If possible, I wanted this to be a mistake on my part.

"...Touko-san, the other day I asked you, 'What do you think of Kyouhei Hioka?' I thought you would notice because you're you, Touko-san, but at that time, I was indirectly asking, 'Aren't you his accomplice?'"

Beside me, Sousei-san yelled, "Naoto! That stuff! You didn't tell me about it!" However, Sousei-san did not move. That was because Touko-san sent a glance at him, keeping him in check. "Continue."

“At that time, I confirmed that you were hiding something from me from your sentimental behavior, Touko-san. Then soon after, we learned of Kyouhei Hioka’s death. I no longer had any choice but to suspect you of being an accomplice.”

“I see.” Touko-san slowly nodded. “So then why did you think Kyouhei was dead? Was it just coincidence?”

I shook my head.

“Sousei-san gave me a hint. It was something he said. He said Kyouhei Hioka was ‘like a ghost’. When I heard that, I began to think. Perhaps it wasn’t that Kyouhei Hioka ‘wouldn’t reveal himself’, but he ‘couldn’t reveal himself’. In other words, perhaps he was no longer of this world.”

“Thinking outside the box, huh.”

Touko-san ducked her head.

“Yes, it’s just as you said earlier, Touko-san. When we went to his apartment, we detected Kyouhei

Hioka's words along with the past words of his younger sister, Kaoru Hioka."

I nodded at Touko-san, then sent a fleeting glance toward the roof of Yagokoro High School.

"–Having learned that fact, I deduced that the police officer Shirou Konno shot could only have been Kyouhei Hioka. In addition, I believe that the revolver Shirou Konno possessed was the one Kyouhei Hioka used in the murder of Miyuki Midorikawa, called Uzume."

If we investigated the revolver, which had been taken back to the station, it would be simple to determine to whom it belonged. If it was Kyouhei Hioka's, the probability that the one Shirou Konno had shot was Kyouhei Hioka rose even higher.

"On the roof, you intended to shoot Shirou Konno from the beginning, regardless of my involvement. As to why, it's because Shirou Konno was Sarutahiko and, you, Touko Aoi-san, are Kagu-tsuchi."

Touko-san immediately shook her head at my words.

“It’s true that I shot Shirou Konno. In the end, that also means I shot Sarutahiko of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’. However, isn’t it a bit much to decide I’m Kagu-tsuchi just because I shot that one person?”

This time, it was my turn to shake my head.

“No, if my reasoning is correct, the one who killed Alex Brown, known as Tajikarao, and Osamu Haida, known as Omoikane – that was also you, Touko-san.”

“O-Oi, Naoto, isn’t that impossible no matter how you look at it?”

As expected, Sousei-san couldn’t keep quiet, and he spoke up.

“Setting aside that Haida bastard, you remember what kind of guy Alex Brown was, right? Touko’s strong, even if she’s a woman. She’s so good at hand-to-hand a normal man wouldn’t stand a chance

against her. But he was an ex-soldier, even if he went bad. Even I couldn't bring him down in one hit, you know?"

There was no way I could forget. He possessed both rocklike muscles over his entire body and a keenness that would not be expected from his bulky appearance, and our pursuit had ended in failure as a result of his extraordinary physical strength.

"It's impossible no matter how you look at it. And that bastard had a survival knife with him, didn't he? Look at Touko. Does she look like she's hurt to you? Who the hell would believe she could take down that ex-soldier bastard in such a short time without even getting hurt?"

"...It's just as you say, Sousei-san."

I nodded at Sousei-san. Touko-san was as beautiful as usual. Even though she had been involved in a fight, there was not a single scratch on her skin. Of course, there was also no indication that she was hiding an injury beneath her clothing.

“So then why! What’s your basis for saying Touko killed those two?”

I understood Sousei-san’s impulse to yell. Normally, I myself would have thought the words leaving my mouth to be impossible. Even so, I could not divert my thoughts.

As for why, there was a “basis” for it.

“…You remember, don’t you, Sousei-san? At the place where Alex Brown, known as Tajikarao, was murdered, there was something extremely interesting in the past conversation between him and the criminal.”

Though I noticed a deep crease appear in Sousei-san’s brow, I did not wait for his reply before stating the answer.

“You? Kill me? Ha! See the difference between my body and yours? You think you can win?”

“…Yeah, now that you mention it, there was something like that. But what about it? Didn’t we

decide he was talking about Kyouhei Hioka?"

That was how we had interpreted it when we thought Kyouhei Hioka was alive. Coming from Alex Brown, who had a large physique even among men, anyone would appear to be small.

"Then, what if the line just now was actually referring to Touko-san? Upon seeing a woman like Touko-san, wouldn't he feel that he was being made a fool of?"

Touko-san was tall for a woman, but from Alex Brown's perspective, she was just like a child.

"Well, I get what you're saying, but that's not nearly enough to convince me Touko took out the ex-soldier bastard."

"Of course. In the end, this theory is lacking the most important piece of evidence to support the idea that Touko-san killed Alex Brown."

"Then hurry up and pull out that conclusive evidence. If I still don't agree with you after you

explain, you'd better be prepared, Naoto."

Sousei-san was as irritated as if he were the one being accused. I gave Touko-san a fleeting look. It seemed she was leaving this to Sousei-san and closely watching our exchange.

Her expression was as calm as ever. How would it change as a result of what was about to occur?

"Sousei-san, do you know that Touko-san is a Persona user?"

"Yeah, of course! How long do you think Touko and I've know each other!?"

"Then you know the specific details of her ability?"

"Are you mocking me? 'Course I know! It's 'Precognition'!"

"With that in mind, we'll return to Alex Brown's murder. Sousei-san, you said before, 'Even I couldn't bring him down in one hit, you know?' You also said, 'Who the hell would believe she could take down that ex-soldier bastard in such a short time without

even getting hurt?'"

"Yeah, I did! What's so weird about that? There's nothing wrong with it, right?"

"No. I think so too. Sousei-san, you always have a way of bringing things to light."

When I readily acknowledged that, Sousei-san blinked repeatedly as if dubious.

"Then don't you think it's strange? That Kyouhei Hioka was able to kill Alex Brown without injury?"

Sousei-san was taken aback at my question.

"From the investigation files, we know that Kyouhei Hioka was very much an excellent detective. He was extremely proficient at the martial arts. That was why I believed until now that he was able to kill Alex Brown. However, like you said, Sousei-san, that is impossible."

Our approach to the case until now was completely based upon the assumption that Kyouhei Hioka was alive. Now that that had been overturned, we could

seek a new approach.

“There was an overwhelming difference in physique, and yet the culprit murdered an armed ex-legionnaire without sustaining any wounds. Thinking this way would be mistaken. Kyouhei Hioka may have been strong, but I do not think he could have been stronger than Sousei Kurogami, a robot. Sousei-san, even you do not believe Alex Brown would have been an easy opponent; that the same would hold true for Kyouhei Hioka goes without saying.”

“…Hmph, that’s true, but it’s not impossible that Kyouhei Hioka got lucky and killed Alex Brown without getting hurt, right?”

“Yes, it’s possible. However, in the end it’s only a possibility. Moreover, I have to say that the probability would be considerably low. Would he really take such a risk? If Kyouhei Hioka were Kagutsuchi, his goal would be revenge against the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’. That revenge is to consign to

oblivion all five members of the 'Five Togakushi Judges' – Kagu-tsuchi would not allow himself to fail with Tajikarao."

"...No, I get it. Yeah. Your explanation's right, Naoto. But that's only why you think Kyouhei Hioka didn't kill Alex Brown, you know? That doesn't mean Touko killed Alex Brown. Actually, if it was impossible for Kyouhei Hioka, it would be even more impossible for a woman like Touko, right? How 'bout it?"

Sousei-san was even more irritated, and I firmly denied his claim. "No.

"Touko-san was able to murder Alex Brown without sustaining injury exactly because she was herself. Furthermore, no one but Touko-san would have been able to kill him without being hurt."

In that moment, I gazed at Touko-san.

"Because Touko-san is a Persona user."

Touko-san looked at me quietly. It was a profound

look, like that of a mother watching over her child as she grew to adulthood.

"...Ah! Ahh... With 'Precognition'... Is that what you're saying...?"

Sousei-san's eyes widened in shock and his voice shook. I nodded firmly. "Yes."

"Probability doesn't matter to Touko-san, who can see ten minutes into the future. That's because she already knows the result. If she just acts in accordance with a set future, she will not make a mistake."

Differences in gender and physique did not matter. If Touko-san successfully saw herself ten minutes into the future, nothing was impossible, no matter how high the risk, stringent the defense, or limited the timespan.

"According to Tsuge-san – Touko-san's 'Precognition' is never wrong. Her predictions are one hundred percent accurate."

Sousei-san gazed, dumbfounded, into empty space, and covered his face with both hands.

“In other words, if there is anyone who, like this time, could accomplish this crime without anyone realizing, it is the person who is on the front lines at the scene, who is in command, and who always has the latest information on the investigation, as well as being able to see the future with the power of her Persona – I believe it could be no one but Touko-san.”

I pressed my point; this was the moment of truth.

“I had my doubts from the moment I was involved with this case. ‘There’s a case even Touko Aoi can’t solve?’ At first, it seemed only a minor detail, but thinking about it now causes me a great deal of unease.”

“…Are you serious?” The words Sousei-san let out were like a moan. He knew well what Touko-san was capable of.

Thinking back, Sousei-san had also said, “Kyouhei

Hioka hasn't been caught even though that Touko's chasing after him, so he's gotta be pretty good. I'm not being sarcastic, I really mean it."

"...It seems like the two of you have pretty high opinions of me, huh?"

The corners of Touko-san's lips twisted upward self-deprecatingly.

"That's a foolish question. I respect you more than anyone."

Just as Touko-san had said she trusted me more than anyone.

I worked as a detective while hiding the fact that I was a woman. Ever since the first time I saw Touko-san, who even as a woman worked more energetically at the scene than anyone, I found her to be radiant. I wanted to be like that someday. I wanted to behave confidently like her, when I became more comfortable with myself as a grown woman. I strongly felt that way.

“At first… I thought Kyouhei Hioka must be so skilled you couldn’t catch him, Touko-san. As he was your senpai and your ex-lover, I believed there was a good chance he might be anticipating your actions. However, in truth that was not the case. No matter how capable you were, apprehending Kyouhei Hioka was impossible.”

Touko-san let out a small breath and let her eyelids fall shut.

“That is because no one can apprehend someone who has already passed on.”

I forced out my words.

“…Touko-san, please turn yourself in.”

Right now, the only thing I could do for her was prevent her from committing any more sins.

“Did you not mean to carry on the will of Kyouhei Hioka, who was shot by Shirou Konno, and murder all the members of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’? Will you stop? You should know better than anyone the

futility of seeking revenge."

–Even if they were avenged, the dead would not return. Those were the words Touko-san herself had told Kyouhei Hioka in an attempt to persuade him.

Suddenly, Touko-san hit me lightly on the chest with her hand.

"...No matter how you look at it, your deductive powers and analytical ability as a detective, and the way you used your Persona's ability, were magnificent. You've grown, Naoto."

Touko-san laughed, not at all flustered.

It seemed Touko-san really had seen "the future where I revealed her to be the criminal". That was why she remained so calm.

In the next instant, I was the one who became flustered.

"That's right, it's as you say, Naoto – I am Kagutsuchi."

Touko-san's eyes were open and perfectly guileless,

and I was overtaken by despair.

"...But you know. It's too bad, but I can't give you full marks."

Touko-san's eyes were just like that of an upright and honest person.

"Naoto, I acknowledge that your claims are logical and persuasive enough, but as it stands, you have nothing but circumstantial evidence, and you didn't even touch on something essential, my 'motive'."

Her eyes were as calm as they always were during an investigation, not worked up and not very worried.

"I wonder why that is... Naoto, isn't it because you have no proof of my motive?"

I was unable to respond. She was right on target.

"All I'll say is that it's not to carry on Kyouhei's will, like you said before."

Touko-san watched me silently for a moment, but finally, she grinned, turned on her heel, and began

walking toward the gate.

“Where are you going!?”

“…Where, you ask? Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to finish the last part of my job.”

–The last part of her job referred to bringing down Futodama, the last surviving member of the “Five Togakushi Judges”.

“Please! Don’t act like this!”

“Impossible. Naoto, you know I hate pointless things. If I stop after coming this far, everything I’ve done up until now will have been a waste.”

“W-Please stop! If you don’t stop, I’ll report to the station right now that Touko Aoi is the true criminal!”

I pulled out my smartphone and prepared myself to push the call button at any time. However, Touko-san did not even slow down her pace.

“–Have you realized, Naoto? That your voice is shaking?”

In truth, the hand that held my phone was also shaking.

My duty as a detective. My personal feelings toward Touko-san. Torn between two warring forces, I was at a complete loss for what to do.

"...Right, right, finding out my 'motive' will be your homework. Is that okay?"

As she spoke, Touko-san began to run quickly.

She was getting away. Even if I had to force her, I had to stop Touko-san. I sent a glance at the person beside me for help. He was at a loss for words. It was the first time I had seen him like that. Sousei-san was standing stock still as if dumbfounded. His powerless figure was just like that of a lost child abandoned by his mother.

At the very least, I would rush after Touko-san. However, it did not take more than a few seconds before I realized that it was meaningless.

I thought she would head outside the school

grounds, but for some reason, Touko-san had not gone through the school gates. Inexplicably, she had used the iron fence beside the main gate and had easily climbed up to the top of the gateposts.

Before my perplexed gaze, Touko-san leapt from the gateposts, which were over three meters high, toward the road beyond the main gate. With a fearless smile lingering on her profile, Touko-san disappeared into the shadows of the gatepost.

Why? There was only the ground waiting where Touko-san had jumped. I was confused, when suddenly the sound of an engine reached my ears. Thinking it couldn't be the case, I ran toward the gate and stepped out onto the road. Touko-san should have been there, but she was nowhere to be found. There was only a large semi, disappearing into the distance.

In the next moment, my eyes were the ones that widened in surprise. Somehow, Touko-san had landed on the canopy above the cargo bed of a truck

that had coincidentally passed by.

"...No, it's not coincidence... It was according to her plans..."

In my line of sight, Touko-san was in the cargo bed of the truck, waving her hand slightly, and behind her emerged the awe-inspiring "Kushinada-Hime".

My conviction left a bad taste in my mouth. I would not be able to catch her, even in a simple game of tag. Even if Sousei-san were in the same mental state as usual and I gave chase on his bike form, she could see the future, and I would be unable to catch up at all.

Frustrated and feeling worthless, I hit the iron fence with my fist with all my might. The dull sound echoed emptily in the silence in front of the gate.

The nightmare did not end there. When we returned to the police station, we were dealt another shocking blow.

At the same time as our return to the station, we

received information that there was a post from “Futodama”, the last of the “Five Togakushi Judges”, on the“Midnight Site”’s Reverse Chat.

It seemed that Futodama had not posted on the chat until now because he had been overseas for several weeks. When he had at last connected to the Internet, he was greatly shaken by the circumstances he found himself in, and negotiations went surprisingly smoothly. We obtained the contact information for Futodama, real name “Tohru Momochi”.

However, that was where the trouble began. The investigator in charge of negotiations with Futodama had immediately sent Tohru Momochi’s contact information to someone, namely the person in charge of crime scene investigation, Touko Aoi.

At the time, Touko-san had warned, “It’s possible that Kyouhei Hioka has an accomplice within the investigation team, so keep Futodama’s specific contact details confidential unless you receive my

approval."

Then why did that investigator tell me? It seemed an exception had been made and Touko-san had told him, "I'll approve Naoto Shirogane only."

When I asked when he had contacted Touko-san, it had been when the forensics team was on the roof, in the middle of inspecting the scene.

That meant Touko-san had already obtained Futodama's contact details when I approached her, asking, "Are you Kagu-tsuchi?" In other words, Touko-san's next destination was unmistakably to seek Futodama.

I explained the situation to the male detectives who were Touko's subordinates, and immediately, all the investigators at the station assembled on the Special Forensics Division floor. There, I told them. Touko Aoi was Kagu-tsuchi, she herself had admitted it, and the reason she had fled. The investigators all wore expressions that said they had difficulty believing me. There were even those among them

who flew into a rage, demanding what right someone like this detective had to suspect their own Touko Aoi.

“Please let me call Futodama’s phone number!” I proposed.

It was a nightmarish reality, but all I could do was ask the investigators and try to persuade them.

“Oh, if you want Tohru-sama, he went out about thirty minutes ago under the supervision of a beautiful woman, Touko Aoi-san.”

The police officers on the floor were abuzz at this reply from a woman who claimed to be a servant of the Momochi house.

“…Hm, where did they go? I don’t know. Tohru-sama doesn’t appreciate us servants prying into his business. Sir and Madam are currently overseas on a business trip, but is there anything else I may do for you?”

After the call ended, the floor quieted down again.

The atmosphere was like that of a funeral.

Misery at first Kyouhei Hioka's, then Touko Aoi's, betrayals, and deep despair, precisely because we knew Touko Aoi's capabilities well.

Touko-san had completely done us in, all by herself.

Chapter 6: Pressure

April 12 Yagokoro Police Special Forensics Division Director's Office

The night stretched into the next day. A team of several hundred investigators had begun the search for Touko Aoi. Naturally, Touko Aoi's whereabouts would not be so easily discovered, and morning came unaccompanied by even the slightest of clues.

There was no post on the Midnight Site either. It was even unclear whether Futodama was alive or dead.

Seven o'clock passed, and Tsuge-san came to work not knowing anything. I told him about Kyouhei Hioka.

"...I see. Kyouhei's already gone... Well, I kinda thought that was it."

In the director's office, I spoke with Tsuge-san about all the events that had unfolded yesterday.

"T-Touko's Kagu-tsuchi! Not just Kyouhei, but

Touko too… How'd it turn out like this…"

Tsuge-san was always lewd and cheerful, but his expression twisted with pain. For Tsuge-san, who had known the two of them ever since they were lovers, the truth surely came as a huge shock. Even though I knew that it was cruel:

"In addition, my partnership with Sousei-san has been dissolved…"

Right now, there was no one I could count on besides Tsuge-san.

"…Gah! Something happened to you guys too? Even though you're our only hope now…"

Tsuge-san drew his thick eyebrows together and sighed.

"…I apologize. I'm the one at fault. Everything was due to my incompetence, with Touko-san and with Sousei-san…"

Immediately after our separation with Touko-san, Sousei-san told me that he was dissolving our

partnership.

After Touko-san left us behind, a period of heavy, empty silence descended between Sousei-san and me. At last, Sousei-san muttered.

“…I quit this case.”

“…Why?”

I asked. I vaguely understood his reasons, but I wanted to hear them straight from his mouth.

“I don’t wanna do something as much of a pain as catching Touko…”

Sousei-san revealed, sounding lonely.

“…And I don’t get it, you know? I’ve got so many questions. Why’d Touko do it? I don’t get it at all and it’s annoying!”

Sousei-san gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

“But! More importantly, I’m torn! I dunno what to do. You saw it , right? The look in Touko’s eyes?

Could you stop her, seeing that look? You couldn't, right? Those were the eyes of someone ready for the worst. Touko's already so sure of herself normally, so seeing her so prepared, I really dunno what to do!"

Sousei-san hit the iron fence with his fist, and the entire gate vibrated like a tuning fork.

"...And, Naoto, sorry, but I don't wanna see your face for a while."

Just as he said, Sousei-san averted his gaze from me.

"Feels like you betrayed me. No... you really did lie to me. You know exactly what I'm talking about, right, with that perfect fucking memory of yours?"

It did not require a particularly good memory to recall what had transpired a few hours ago.

"You're too fucking distant! Why didn't you tell me!? If you suspected Touko and thought she was Kagutsuchi, why didn't you tell me a damn word of it!? Weren't we supposed to be partners? That means

you shouldn't lie or anything! I'm so fucking pissed off you didn't trust me at all!"

Sousei-san's shout resounded and tore through the silence. I was at a loss for words and stood stock-still, silent. His torrent of words stung like thorns.

"...I'm breaking off our partnership. Bye."

Sousei-san disappeared without giving me a second glance. I felt as if I would shed tears of misery at the departures of first Touko-san, then Sousei-san, due to my mistakes.

However, if I cried here, I would probably not hate myself completely, and so I ground my teeth forcefully as I looked up at the deep blue sky.

I hit the table with the sides of my fists. The teacup containing coffee shook and rattled.

"If only I had been more composed! If only I had had more courage!"

Looking back on the events of yesterday once again, I was disgusted by my own timidity.

“Oi oi, don’t blame yourself like that. In that case, what was Tetsuma Tsuge doing? I know Kyouhei and Touko’s personalities well and I still I couldn’t do anything. You’ll make me want to blame myself.”

In a sudden change from before, Tsuge-san spoke in a lighthearted tone.

“We shouldn’t be focusing on regrets now, right? We can do whatever we want later. Now’s the time to rack our brains and figure out how to stop Touko. And ya know, isn’t it your job as a detective to rack your brains?”

Tsuge-san showed his teeth in a smirk.

“I’ll help if there’s anything I can do, kay? Shouldn’t we fight together to stop Touko?”

Surely this was also painful for Tsuge-san. Even so, he was doing his best to act cheerful and console me through my discouragement. Sousei-san and Ai-chan, and then Touko-san. I believed it was only natural that Tsuge-san missed everyone.

"...Thank you very much," I murmured softly.

Tsuge-san was a large man. In both appearance and spirit. I had to respond to his consideration.

"I've cheered up thanks to you, Tsuge-san. That is the last time you will hear me complain. I'll try to come up with a method."

Though it was stiff, I gave him a smile.

"That's what I'm saying! Don't try to do it all yourself. You and Touko are both like that. Why do our women try to handle everything themselves? Maybe the men around you are flakes, but it's better than worrying 'bout it alone, right?"

I calmed down as he spoke. What a bad habit. I had completely forgotten.

The reassurance from having friends I could count on. I should have already known: if I was with my friends, we would be able to overcome any difficulty we faced, and yet I was becoming embarrassed at my haughtiness in thinking that I would make do

alone.

“Anyway, want me to wallop that idiot Sousei and drag him back here? He’s got a mouth on him, but you can more or less count on him.”

I hesitated for a moment and shook my head slightly.

“…No, that is, I don’t know how to face him. I did something extremely discourteous to him.”

I myself insisted that trust was the most essential facet of any partnership, but I had not trusted my partner, Sousei-san.

I had covered up the fact that I suspected Touko-san to be the criminal because I believed that, to him, I was nothing compared to Touko-san.

“That’s, uh, don’t be too hard on yourself. Touko is special to Sousei. He sees his dead mother in her…”

Tsuge-san’s eyes were a bit lonely, and yet they also held nostalgia and fondness.

“His mother…?”

“Is it weird for a robot like him to have a mother? Well, think about it. Isn’t it also weird for a robot like him to have a humanlike name like ‘Sousei Kurogami’?”

“–Ah. I didn’t think much of it in the beginning, but it’s true, now that you mention it.”

Sousei-san’s formal designation was – Number R-00, codename “GENESIS”.

“Like Touko said before, the completed Genesis didn’t live up to our Kirijo robot research team’s expectations. To put it bluntly, he was a failed product. You’re a regular kid, but I don’t have to tell you what happens to a failed product, right?”

“…They are disposed of?”

“…Right. Sousei was at a higher level than all the other robots at the time, and if his existence was announced to the world, he’d probably be admired. But we weren’t trying to make just a high-level robot. We were aiming for something that could fight Shadows, an Anti-Shadow Suppression

Weapon with a Persona."

I swallowed deeply, hearing Tsuge-san divulge this inside story full of corporate secrets.

"D'ya remember the basic idea behind Personas I explained before?"

"...Er, if I remember correctly – Personas are a rare power that can be used only by those chosen. There are various theories and phases of study, but one theory is that Personas are an 'embodiment of the user's psyche', called 'one's other self'. In addition, they say the ability to call forth a Persona is a latent power only liberated in an extreme situation – is that right?"

"Yeah, yeah! Good job! I heard from Sousei, but you've really got a good memory! You're not famous as a young detective for nothing!"

Tsuge-san's admiration was so exaggerated that I felt embarrassed.

"That idea was originally proposed by our robot

research team like this. ‘If they successfully cultivate the same kind of soul as humans, shouldn’t they awaken as Persona users even if they’re robots?’”

“…Eh? Please wait. Sousei-san is a Persona user, isn’t he? Then doesn’t that count as a success?”

“Now it does. At the time, six years ago, it didn’t look like Genesis would awaken to a Persona. In the first place, it was a mistake to make him a male type; no, maybe the basic structure of the soul was wrong. Anyway, everyone in the research team wanted to give up, but there was one person who proposed we wait before disposing of him. She was the young genius in charge of Genesis’s design – Yuuri Kurogami.”

“Kurogami? Could she be…”

Naturally, I knew the family name, but I had also heard that given name, “Yuuri”. It was a name that Sousei-san had inadvertently mentioned before.

“Yeah, that’s right. Sousei got his last name from

Yuuri."

Tsuge-san nodded emphatically.

"Yuuri suggested we give her Genesis for a year. Genesis'd just been born, so he was innocent as a baby and still mentally a minor. She'd let him live as part of human society, would plant a buncha knowledge into him and let him mature, and try stimulating the birth of a Persona. The Kirijo brass agreed, under a lot of pressure from Yuuri, and gave Genesis a one-year grace period. By the way, Yuuri was the one who started calling him by the name you know, Sousei. That's how much Yuuri thought of Sousei as her kid."

"Genesis", as in the "Book of Genesis". It seemed his name had been borrowed from there.

[Book of Genesis: 創世記, or "Souseiki". "Sousei" is Japanese for "Genesis".]

"...I see, so this Yuuri Kurogami-san took care of Sousei-san for a year. And then Sousei-san started thinking of Yuuri-san as a mother."

“Yeah. But don’t get me wrong. Sousei’s rude attitude and mouth aren’t because of Yuuri. Yuuri’s heart was in the right place, but she was really a gentle airhead. If I had to say, Sousei was influenced more by TV and Touko, who had a worse mouth then than she does now.”

I thought that Tsuge-san’s blunt personality may also have had a strong influence. Also fascinating was that Touko-san’s name had come up in this context.

“You’ve known Touko-san for six years, haven’t you?”

“Nah, right now it’s closer to ten years. As a Persona user, Touko’s been comin’ and goin’ from the Kirijo Group’s research labs since she was a high schooler. Touko and Yuuri were best friends. They were about the same age and complete opposites, but maybe they got along better ‘cause of it. So naturally, I met Touko. Follows that I met Kyouhei Hioka too, since he was Touko’s friend.”

Tsuge-san snorted slightly.

“Six years ago, Touko’d just become a detective and was colder than she is now, but in front of Kyouhei, she tried her damn hardest to be strong. It was really fun watching the two of them really starting to trust each other, Touko not holdin’ back her words and Kyouhei just smilin’ wryly and taking it.”

Tsuge-san’s face broke into a smile, as if remembering that time. “…That was a pretty lively year.” I caught a glimpse of those happy days within Tsuge-san’s broad grin.

“So, what is Yuuri-san doing now?”

I asked a casual question. I thought she could tell me many stories about Sousei-san and Touko-san.

However, Tsuge-san wore an uncomfortable expression. “Yuuri died five years ago…” His shoulders slumped heavily.

“There was an explosion during an experiment. The accident happened a few days before the deadline to

dispose of Genesis. It happened because Yuuri made an unthinkable amateur mistake in connecting machinery, even though she was a genius."

Tsuge-san's gaze was like that of a father recalling a daughter who had married and now lived somewhere far away.

"Like Yuuri planned, Genesis matured mentally to a surprising extent over one year. But most importantly, he hadn't awakened to a Persona, unfortunately. Maybe Yuuri was getting impatient..."

I noticed that Tsuge-san's fists had clenched tightly on his lap.

"...So then, he'd lived under the same roof with someone like a parent to him, and 'cause he was a robot and it was job, he couldn't just roll over and give up on her. He had the human feeling of wanting to save her no matter what..."

I knew well that Tsuge-san was reflecting on his own powerlessness; I had had the same feeling just

yesterday.

“Ironic, right! Sousei’s Persona awakened ‘cause of his strong sense of loss from Yuuri’s death! But! Reality is cruel! What the research team really wanted was a combat-type Persona, so they wouldn’t take it!”

It was a dramatic past that made my heart clench just hearing it.

“When you first met Sousei, we said he’d gone wild ‘cause of a mess-up in an experiment, right?”

“…Yes. I remember.”

“That was an instinctive reaction to a huge burden on his soul. We were trying to artificially make him awaken to a combat-type Persona. The same experiment Yuuri was trying when the accident happened. I was carryin’ on Yuuri’s will. But it’s an unprecedented test. T’be honest, there was pretty much no chance it would work…”

Tsuge-san heaved out a huge sigh, like heavy

machinery expelling steam.

“Even so! I knew how Sousei felt! It was so Yuuri would be recognized too, even though she was dead! I know he thought if everyone acknowledged him, who was made and raised by Yuuri, they’d praise Yuuri Kurogami, the one who created Genesis, and say she really was a genius! Even if I knew the experiment would fail! I had to help him out!”

Tsuge-san yelled in a loud voice. He laughed feebly for a while, then finally sank deep into the sofa and fell silent, staring up at the white ceiling.

I could not find the words to respond. No matter what I said, I thought the words of an outsider like me would not satisfy Tsuge-san.

“...Here.” At the very least, I could pour him a warm cup of coffee as thanks.

“...Oh, thanks.” I was slightly relieved to see Tsuge-san hungrily drinking the coffee.

“...Thank you very much, Tsuge-san. I’m glad I

could hear about Sousei-san's early life."

Sousei-san's past, which I had always wanted to know but did not want to bring up. Our partnership had been hastily arranged, and I knew that we had not pried into each other's business because we would soon part ways.

However, hearing it like this, I felt regret at my own timidity up until now. It may have been better to know sooner.

"...Well, he's rude and cheeky and acts all tough, but he's definitely not a bad kid. Take care of Sousei."

Tsuge-san finished drinking the coffee and spoke in a calmer voice.

"That's right. I'll start by bowing my head to Sousei-san and asking if we can't be partners again."

"Ah, no, wait a sec. I'd be happy if you guys let me help patch things up, kinda like a dad, but don't tell Sousei I told you about the past! He'll definitely get really mad! You can imagine, right? You wouldn't

know it from looking at him, but Sousei's pretty shy!"

In the next moment, Tsuge-san snorted as if enjoying himself. I found myself smiling naturally in response. I had been caught up in the mood, and as a result, I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"...Now that I think about it, it's not just Sousei-san. I don't know anything about Touko-san either."

Now that the situation with Sousei-san was looking up, it was inevitable that my thoughts turned to Touko-san.

"I only know who she is as a detective. I know there's nothing I can do about it, but I can't help but feel that things could have turned out differently had I understood Touko-san better."

I had said myself that I would no longer complain, and I was going against that. I could not help but feel self-deprecating.

"...Geez, there's nothing you can do."

Tsuge-san shook his head in a huge motion that matched his body.

"Well, don't get me wrong. I'm not blamin' you. I just mean it's unavoidable. Humans don't really know much about themselves, an' there's no way they'd understand other people. Now, I'm just makin' excuses, but Touko's not the kinda woman who'd just wear her heart on her sleeve. I see her all year round and there are still sides of Touko Aoi I don't know about."

"...Tsuge-san, do you not know her 'criminal motive' either?"

"...T'be honest, no. This is just a pearl of wisdom from an old man, but I can give you an idea. To put it simply, I think it's got to do with Kyouhei. Can't really say it's the main reason for her motive, though."

However, I had high hopes for this, seeing as it came from Tsuge-san. Why was that?

“If you wanna know about Touko, it would’ve been best to ask Kyouhei. It really is too bad… Ah! No, no! Gotta stop bein’ depressing! Well, let’s see, other than that, all you can do is ask her yourself!”

In the next moment, I stood from the sofa energetically. It was as if I had been electrocuted.

“…That’s it!”

Thanks to Tsuge-san’s words, I could clearly see the steps I should take.

“Hold on, hold on! You’re sayin’ ‘That’s it’, but I was just desperate when I said that, y’know? Isn’t there a lot wrong with tryin’ to ask her yourself?”

Tsuge-san was completely confused.

“Of course we can’t.”

Tsuge-san’s flustered behavior was funny, and the corner of my mouth twitched upward.

“Touko-san herself told me that ‘discovering her criminal motive is my homework’. For her to use that wording specifically means that there is some

significance in searching for her motive."

Tsuge-san rubbed his jaw with his fingertips as he waited for my next words.

"I think Touko means we should hear it from 'Kyouhei Hioka-san'."

There was something only we could do–

In the next moment, Tsuge-san cried, "Oh, I get it! That's what you mean!" and smacked his palm. The strong "whump", rather than a "whack", was rather like Tsuge-san.

"Sousei's 'Past Reading', huh. Right, right. He's pretty reliable, huh?"

"I don't know about reliable, but he is indispensible. Without Sousei-san, we wouldn't have been able to corner Touko-san in this case."

"Yeah! Okay, let me handle things from here. Just wait a bit. Lemme think of places special to Kyouhei and Touko..."

Tsuge-san slapped his cheeks with his hands and

began to mumble. I was glad he was so quick to understand.

It was unlikely that we would be able to hear directly from Touko-san herself. In addition, Kyouhei Hioka, who knew the most about her past, was no longer of this world. In that case, there was no other recourse remaining than to detect Kyouhei Hioka's past conversation in a place special to them when they were intimate.

"Please." I reseated myself on the sofa and quietly drank coffee so as not to distract Tsuge-san as he searched his memories.

"...Hmm, their favorite bar is in the red light district behind Yagokoro Station, but even if they drank there, in the end it's a public place and I dunno if Touko would speak her mind there... If they were gonna have a serious conversation 'bout Touko's motive, there might be a better chance it was at the apartment they lived in together 'till five years ago... Ahh, damn, I hate growin' old, can't remember the

name of the place…"

I waited several dozen more seconds as Tsuge-san muttered.

"–Ah, that was it! Right, right! It was 'Iwato Apartments'!"

In contrast to Tsuge-san, who looked overjoyed at having picked out that fragment of memory, my expression reflexively stiffened.

"Oh yeah, and I kinda remember hearin' their place in Iwato Apartments was on a floor with a good view. What was the address again…"

"It's all right. I know where Iwato Apartments is."

I answered immediately, and Tsuge-san's eyes grew round. "Whoa, as expected of the Detective Prince! You don't miss a thing!" Tsuge-san praised me, nodding. Of course, it was a misunderstanding.

Iwato Apartments was where the body of Miyuki Midorikawa, known as Uzume, had been found.

At that time, an abandoned apartment building

outside the city had seemed a suitable place for a murder scene and I had considered no other reason, but in reality, it seemed it was a place Kyouhei Hioka was familiar with and had ties to.

“At that time, if I and Sousei-san had gone over every inch of the mansion, not just the entrance hall where the body was discovered…”

I knew there was no changing what had already happened, even if I regretted it, and yet I could not help but worry at my lower lip.

“Tsuge-san! Thank you for all your help! I’m going to the scene immediately!”

I stood up, meaning to strike while the iron was hot. Then, as soon as I stood, I remembered there was nothing I could do alone. “…That’s right.

“…Er, Tsuge-san, do you know where Sousei-san is now?”

I felt that I owed him an apology. It was irrefutable that I needed him. However, a large part of me felt

quite awkward.

When I spoke, Tsuge-san's shoulders shook hugely and he laughed. I inclined my head to the side, as if to ask why, and Tsuge-san jerked his chin toward the entrance of the director's office, still grinning. I turned around like he indicated and a person's silhouette was visible beyond the frosted glass of the door. The person was quite large.

"Ahahaha! He thought back and figured he said too much. But now he's too scared to show his face and can't open the door!"

In the next moment, Tsuge-san's intentionally provocative words echoed loudly through the room.

"Man, he's really just a big chicken!"

"W-Who the hell are you calling a chicken, Gramps!?"

In the next moment, the door was thrown open forcefully and a tall man in red and black clothes stormed into the room. I was already very familiar

with his voice and figure.

"...Ah." Sousei-san's eyes met mine and his expression became one of chagrin.

"...Ah." I had not been able to emotionally prepare myself, and so I also let out a foolish sound.

"Oi! You two! Here's your chance! Both of you bow and make up!"

Tsuge-san spoke in a booming voice. Perhaps he took in the situation and was trying to encourage us as we stood silent and unmoving, but it evidently had the opposite effect.

"...Geez! You're hopeless, Naoto! If you haven't got this Sousei Kurogami with you, you can't do anything alone! Well, I guess the great me just has to pair up with you again!"

His arms crossed, Sousei-san declared in an overbearing manner.

"...What? You're much too presumptuous. I've worked alone as a detective up until now and solved

countless cases by myself. To put it simply, it's easier for me to work alone. Sousei-san, if you must insist on aiding me, I won't refuse you."

I returned his words and his behavior tit for tat.

"...Oi oi, are you guys in preschool!? Why're you actin' like this? Stop this weird competition and talk seriously!"

It was only natural that Tsuge-san be shocked. I was more dumbfounded than anyone that my actions were in direct opposition to my feelings. However, when the person facing me acted so arrogant, for some reason my hackles raised unconsciously.

"...Um, I'm in a hurry. If your large body continues to block the entrance, it will only hinder me. Please move."

"Why you! Naoto! You're so! Dammit, what an uncute woman! This would all be over if you just apologized! Weren't you just telling Gramps you'd bow to me!?"

"...You were eavesdropping? Ah, scary."

"W-what's with that 'Ah, scary'!? Don't fuck with me! You're trying my fucking patience here!"

"Ah! Dammit! Are you idiots!? The two of you're idiots together! No, it's 'cause you're together that you're idiots! This isn't the time for you to act stupid and fight!"

At Tsuge-san's roar, both of us closed our open mouths.

Most likely, not only I, but also the person in front of me whose eyes darted around, understood that Tsuge-san's assertion was absolutely right.

"...It can't be helped. If you say so, Tsuge-san. I suppose I'll have to bear with it."

"...Yeah, can't be helped. I'll let you get away with it just for today 'cause of Gramps."

Both of us knew. This was far from over.

Seeing our awkward exchange, Tsuge-san threw himself down on the sofa and clutched at his sides,

laughing. “Damn, you two! You just can’t be honest!”

“…Shall we go?”

“…Yeah.”

The two of us exchanged words uncomfortably as if embarrassed and left the room, the atmosphere between us complicated.

“No matter what you guys say, you make a good combination!”

Tsuge-san’s powerful yell resounded at our backs.

April 12 Iwato Apartments

“…I’ll say this first. It’s not like I’ve completely forgiven you or anything. But like Gramps said, we shouldn’t be fighting right now. It’s just a temporary truce for Touko’s sake.”

“…I will not make excuses. Trust is something you win with actions, not words.”

“Then we agree. And also. We’re bringing back that stubborn Touko, even if we have to drag her by the scruff of her neck.”

“Yes, of course.”

We would definitely not leave Touko-san alone. I nodded, reflecting on yesterday’s regret.

“We’ll pick up this fight after that!”

I responded to Sousei-san’s harsh, refreshing words with a bitter smile. “…Yes, please prepare yourself for when this is over.”

I hadn’t realized it inside the director’s office on the fifth basement floor, but from the look of the sky, it unfortunately seemed likely to rain.

We reached our destination for the second time faster than I had expected. Luckily, and thanks to that, we succeeded in just avoiding the light drizzle that began to fall.

We ducked under the yellow “KEEP OUT” tape at the front door and headed for the apartment’s entrance hall, which was devoid of any presence. The gray building against the gray sky was suggestive of the “finale”, and my footsteps

naturally grew heavier.

Though it was our second time here, the previous time was in the middle of the night, and this time, in the afternoon, it looked like a completely different place. I wondered if that was because of the difference in my mood. Naturally, the desertion and lack of life characteristic of an abandoned building was unchanged.

"...Five stories, huh? Should we go around detecting on that floor?"

Sousei-san asked as he looked up at the impersonal ceiling.

I gazed around at the crumbling outer walls, the pillars with protruding rebar, the broken window glass, and the damaged concrete floor and answered.

"...I feel that recklessly walking around such a worn-down building is dangerous, but there's no other way."

"But you know? Is it gonna be okay?"

“What?”

“If I’m alone, the limit to my detection range is about five meters. Even if you power it up with ‘Ability Tune’, it’s barely wide enough to cover the school roof. This apartment’s lot is way bigger than the school roof. And even if we go around all the floors, worst case is we’ll be using our Personas five times. I’m asking if you’ve got the stamina for it.”

Sousei-san looked doubtful, and I pursed my lips.

“…It’s true that unlike you, a robot, I have a living body and repeatedly using my Persona will soon tire me out. Using a Persona causes great physical and mental exhaustion.”

To use an example, I felt fatigue similar to that following exercise of a rarely used muscle.

“…So, what do we do today? Give up before you fall on your face?”

Sousei-san asked, feigning ignorance. From his reckless grin, he already knew my answer when he

asked.

“A foolish question. I do not care about appearances. I may or may not collapse, but I will do it.”

I declared firmly, just as he expected.

“…However, if I really do collapse, I’ll be counting on you, Sousei-san. It will take little effort for you just to carry me and return, right? You’re stupidly strong, after all.”

I insulted him in a lighthearted tone. Sousei-san snorted with laughter. “…Shut up. Who’s stupidly strong, stupid?”

As expected, the entrance yielded the same results as last time. I was correct in thinking that Kyouhei Hioka had not uttered a single word here.

Continuing on, we changed locations to the second floor. There, we tried using “Past Reading” and “Ability Tune” at the same time to see if we could detect anything. I could only encompass the floor, so I maintained that detection range and tuned

Tsukuyomi's ability so that it went back months and years.

There was no way I would say it, but it was physically rather trying. That was also true in general for using my Persona, but carefully scrutinizing a large volume of past conversations was backbreaking labor.

At present, this was an abandoned building, but at one time, it had been a flourishing apartment. At its peak, a wide range of people of varying ages had lived here. There were so many "deceased" here that my school, comprised mostly of young people, paled in comparison. The volume of conversations increased in proportion to the number of those deceased.

I scanned over all those conversations so as not to overlook anything. Whenever the contents seemed to be relevant to the case, I focused my attention and scrutinized them carefully. It was a repetition of simple work, but the time it took was not

insignificant. In addition, the conversations were not always savory, and I found my mental state worsening.

Would I really be able to bear it, physically and mentally, until the fifth floor? It was only the second floor and already I was feeling uneasy. In the end, all of the various conversations detected on the second and third floors were unrelated to the case. The feeling that our efforts were in vain took its toll on me. Sousei-san, who did not have the problem of endurance, became irritated as we wasted more and more time.

We silently proceeded to the fourth floor. Over two hours had already passed since we started working.

"...H-Hey... I screwed up... Maybe I'm too soft... R-Right, nothing I can say to that... Don't get mad, Touko... You'll mess up those good looks, you know?"

As soon as we began the detection on the fourth floor, we picked up lines from someone who seemed to be Kyouhei Hioka among the numerous past

conversations. We found the word “Touko” in the lines and nodded at each other.

–It was a conversation between Kyouhei Hioka and Touko Aoi.

“…You know, this is the first time I realized… G-Getting shot by a gun hurts a lot more than I thought… Hey, c’mon, laugh… You warned me, and this’s what I get for not listening to you… Gimme a break… You know too, Touko… This is the end for me.”

Presumably, this was the conversation he had had in his final moments. From the words “shot by a gun”, we knew this conversation happened after he was shot by Shirou Konno. Then it became clear that Touko-san had been the last person to meet Kyouhei Hioka.

“I won’t ask you to understand, but at least know how I feel… I couldn’t forgive them at all! I couldn’t forgive those guys! Those ‘Five Togakushi Judges’! Why are those guys alive when Kaoru is dead!? It’s ridiculous!”

“…It’s hard to prosecute cyber crimes, and even if you

could, I gotta say the punishment would be really light compared to their real sins... And on top of that, some of the perps are minors and won't get the sentence the victims' families hope for..."

"I know, I know. I hate crime and would risk my life if it meant one less crime in this city, remember? I'm the detective of justice everyone acknowledged, remember? Haha, don't say it myself? It's funny... Even so, I decided to dirty my hands with crime... I've gotta be crazy..."

"...Right, I broke when I lost Kaoru... My heart broke from losing my precious little sister, the only one I had, and the powerlessness from not being able to protect the person closest to me from crime, even though I'm a detective... But Kaoru died! And those guys who made my sister die with their false slander wouldn't be judged and didn't understand their sins! No reflecting! Living without a care in the world! Knowing that drove me crazy! Someone! Anyone is fine! I don't care if it's God or the devil! Someone pass judgment on them! But! My wish wasn't granted... So I decided to become an avenging demon myself..."

"...Hahaha, it's like you said, Touko... Might've been better if I'd never known... I knew, so I couldn't stay calm... It's ironic... It used to be the other way around... Even though it was my job to warn you, Touko, the vigorous one who absolutely loathed criminals, who didn't have a shred of sympathy for them... It's been years since then, and for me to be warned by you... I couldn't have imagined it..."

"...Will you listen to my last request?... Stop it, don't say things like that. Don't say such stupid things like you'll take over from me, even if you're joking... You know, I want you to be happy... With me, if we can... Ah, no, it's nothing... Right, right... My request... Well, my request is easy..."

"–Hey, Touko, will you kill me?"

"...See? Easy, isn't it? An easy job, all you gotta do is pull the trigger... You're not surprised, huh. As expected of you... Or do you get how I feel... It's stupid pride. If I die, I'll hate being killed by the Five Togakushi Judges... But it'll still feel like I lost if I kill myself, right? ...So, I think

I wanna die by your hand, Touko."

"...So this is how my life, Kyouhei Hioka's life, ends... Pretty sloppy, huh... But you know, no matter how many times I redo my life, next time I'll die in the same sloppy way again... E-Even if you tell me not to talk anymore... There's still a ton of stuff I wanna tell you, Touko... If I think this is the last time I talk to you, the words just keep on coming... Right, normally this is where I say the things I've wanted to say.... T-Thanks for going along with my selfishness in the end... Ah, if I'm reborn, one more time, with you–"

–His lines were interrupted there.

Both Sousei-san and I stood stock still, gazing at the past conversation shining on Tsukuyomi's marquee.

His magnificent last moments. My chest tightened just seeing his words. How had Touko-san felt, she who happened to be present and who had been very close to Kyouhei Hioka? It was an extremely heavy thought and I was afraid to even imagine it.

What came as the greatest shock to us was that,

from the contents of the conversation and the the actual situation, we had deduced that Shirou Konno, known as Sarutahiko, had shot Kyouhei Hioka, but the one who had ultimately killed him – was Touko-san.

In the next instant, I fell face-first into the inverted triangle of Sousei-san's back, overcome with dizziness.

"I–I apologize."

I made to straighten my posture, but there was no strength in my legs. My knees would not stop shaking. Amatsu-Mikaboshi's form was disappearing. I was amazed that I had exhausted so much of my strength that I could no longer maintain my Persona.

"Oi, you okay? Aren't you exhausted?"

Sousei-san looked back and narrowed his eyes.

"...No, I'm fine. I'm just a little tired. I'll recover soon enough."

There was no basis for it. It was the first time I had put all my strength into using Amatsu-Mikaboshi. I could not imagine what would happen to me after this.

“Okay, let’s go to the fifth floor.”

However, this was no time to stop. Even so, Sousei-san did not move.

“...Hey, Naoto. Shouldn’t we regroup for now? We got Kyouhei Hioka’s conversation right before he died. Isn’t that good enough for today?”

Sousei-san gazed at me reproachfully. I took several deep breaths, straightened my back, looked Sousei-san straight in the eye, and shook my head.

“Postponing the problem cannot end well. I want to reach Touko-san as soon as possible.”

“I get how you feel, but what the hell do you think’ll happen to you!? If you go up against Touko as weak as you are now, there’s no way you’ll win!”

Sousei-san’s warning was right on the mark. I had

always respected the detective known as Touko Aoi, and there was no way I would underestimate her. However, I shook my head firmly and refused.

"...I don't want to leave her alone for one more second."

We could not back down now. Unless I was mistaken, Touko-san was surely awaiting our arrival.

Wasn't this "homework" a message for us from Touko-san? In other words, searching for her motive was a "problem" to lead us to her, and once we determined her motive, the "solution" would be awaiting us.

No, the truth was that I had nothing else to believe. From the very beginning, Touko-san had had us in the palm of her hand.

"...Dammit! Do what you want! In exchange! Go all out, Naoto! If you collapse I'm never gonna accept you! I'll call you incompetent forever!"

Sousei-san said haughtily, and with long strides, he passed me and climbed to the fifth floor.

He really was a tactless person. Who in the world would fall for that kind of obvious provocation? I shook my head in exasperation and told him.

“The same holds for you! Don’t get in my way!”

In the next instant, I walked quickly and overtook Sousei-san.

Most likely, it only applied to me. Would I lose to him? When I thought that, strength sprang up from the bottom of my heart. Thanks to that, it seemed I could continue on for a little longer.

And so, racing neck-and-neck and wasting strength for no reason, we competed until we leapt out onto the fifth floor.

“–Huh. Pretty good view.”

Sousei-san stopped in his tracks at the scenery just when we reached the fifth floor. Fortunately, there were no tall buildings in the area, and the beautiful

scenery of Yagokoro City spread out uninterrupted before our eyes. If the weather had been good, it would certainly have been a refreshing view.

"...Ah."

In the next moment, the words Tsuge-san had previously spoken in the director's office replayed themselves in the back of my mind.

"Sousei-san! Call forth Tsukuyomi! Please use 'Past Reading'!"

"The hell? What's with you? I'd do it even if you didn't tell me to!"

Sousei-san summoned his Persona as he complained.

"Go back and detect conversations from more than five years ago! I'll support you with all my strength!"

There was a reason I was impatient. I believed this to be the floor where Touko-san and Kyouhei Hioka lived when they lived together six years ago.

Of course, if that was the case, it raised the question

of why Kyouhei Hioka's conversation on the brink of death was detected one floor below, on the fourth floor.

In the end, this was just my hypothesis, but originally, Kyouhei Hioka had intended to breathe his last on the fifth floor, where he shared many memories with Touko-san. However, as he was dying after taking a bullet, perhaps he did not have the energy to climb up to the fifth floor and had used up all his strength getting to the fourth floor.

When I imagined Kyouhei Hioka down on his hands and knees, mustering his strength and desperately climbing to the fifth floor, I felt a deep sense of sadness.

"You don't mind killing criminals if it'll solve a case? Touko, your way of thinking is too extreme!"

A little while after we began the detection, we found a conversation we could not overlook.

"...Bingo."

Several factors matched, the time frame of five years ago and the name Touko, and they convinced me this was an exchange from when the two of them had been living together.

"You should hate the crime, not the criminal! ...No, don't call me a softy. That's not it. Us police have gotta carry out a police officer's duty. Our duty is to apprehend criminals. It's not the police's place to judge them!"

"...Even I'm human, and I've got feelings too. I've experienced a lot of unreasonable things. I've seen the worst kind of criminals, the ones you wouldn't feel a shred of sympathy for even if they died. But our power as police isn't for getting emotional and wiping out criminals. It's the power to protect the people of the city, right?"

"If you don't get what I'm saying, that's a problem with your emotions, Touko! Don't you hate criminals so much because your parents were killed by them a long time ago!? Now! I want you to tell me clearly. Touko, why did

you become a police officer?"

"...Revenge on all criminals, huh... That's kind of futile... But even if you got rid of all the criminals in the world, your parents still wouldn't come back!"

"I'm not saying it's pointless! Just by dirtying your own hands, you might be able to save unfortunate kids like yourself... But then who's gonna save you?"

"...There's no way I'm just gonna sit back and watch you fall, Touko. I definitely won't let you do anything that ridiculous as long as I live. If you try, I'll risk my own life to stop you."

What a strange feeling. Kyouhei Hioka six years ago and Kyouhei Hioka on the verge of death. They should have been the same person, and yet their claims were complete opposites. We could not detect her because she was still alive, but the position of his conversational partner, Touko-san, may also have been the exact opposite six years ago compared to now.

"...Well, that's how it is."

We took a few dozen minutes more and finished reading the remainder of Kyouhei Hioka's conversations. Within the past conversations were happy conversations between lovers, conversations between lovers which were embarrassing to read, and the interesting fact that the pendant Touko-san wore around her neck had been a birthday present from Kyouhei Hioka. We only perceived Kyouhei Hioka's lines, but even so, their intimacy was very clearly conveyed.

We reached a good stopping point and I sat down. I was made aware of my own exhaustion by my ragged breathing and the countless beads of sweat on my forehead.

"So, did you figure something out?"

Sousei-san asked from above me. Enviably, he looked completely composed.

"...Right. I now have some idea of Touko-san's criminal motive."

"Hmm. But for all that, you don't look or sound too

good, you know?"

Fatigue was not the only cause. I had reached the end of my reasoning.

We had come here in accordance with Touko-san's hint, but I had still not figured out the crucial answer informing us of her whereabouts. There had been a vital hint to the resolution of the case on the fifth floor of Iwato Apartments, which held Touko-san and Kyouhei Hioka's most precious memories, but she was not here.

What place would she possibly choose as the final stage to complete her revenge other than here?

However, I could not allow Sousei-san to become anxious, and so I pretended to be fine.

"No, well, it's nothi-"

I began to speak and then swallowed my words. Tsuge-san's words replayed in my mind and I remembered the faces of those important to me. I let out a single breath and asked Sousei-san.

“–Er, to tell the truth, I’ve reached the end of my rope. I cannot begin to guess where Touko-san has taken Futodama and gone into hiding.”

I could not forget. I was not alone. I was not fighting by myself.

“What would you do in this situation, Sousei-san?”

When I spoke, Sousei-san blinked at me, his expression wild.

“…What’s wrong? Your face has always been strange, but it just grew stranger?”

“…Ugh, gross. Naoto being honest is gross.”

Sousei-san screwed up his face.

“…How rude. It’s not so unusual. We’re partners. It’s important for partners to have a trusting relationship where they can consult with each other on anything.”

“Hey, who the hell are you and what’ve you done with Naoto?”

Sousei-san's shoulders slumped in an exaggerated action.

"...Well, anyway, I'd just act."

Sousei-san said whatever he wanted but answered the question honestly. He really did have a good heart, just as Tsuge-san said.

"I've got great physical strength and mobility as a bike. And I don't really like thinking hard about things like you, Naoto."

"That's just like you, Sousei-san."

"Huh? You looking down on me?"

"No, I'm not. Though I don't respect you, either."

"You really are an asshole!"

"I'm joking. You've been a great help."

I regained my cheer as I exchanged lighthearted banter with Sousei-san and stood heavily. It was no use sitting idle here. Perhaps we would have luck following the suggestion of my partner. In any case,

we would return to the station and investigate Touko-san's early life.

It was right when I turned toward the stairs to the lower floors.

"Hey, what do we do?"

"Hm? About what?"

I asked in return, not understanding Sousei-san's question. When I looked over, Sousei-san was gazing up at the impersonal concrete ceiling.

"I'm asking what we do about up there? We haven't checked out the roof yet, right?"

In the next moment, I was off like a shot, starting to run.

"O-Oi! Naoto! What're you doing?"

In front of me was the emergency staircase leading to the roof.

"Hurry, Sousei-san! Touko-san may be on the roof!"

I had remembered. This time too, without fail – this

scenario was just as Touko Aoi, who knew the future, had planned.

In that case, it was fate that we would be led to Iwato Apartments, following the hint she had given us. When I thought that, I realized that the remaining place, the roof, would be the stage for the finale of this case.

We ran up the spiral-shaped emergency staircase. As we ascended, the smell of dampness became more strongly pronounced. At last, when we took our first steps onto the roof with a savagery appropriate for an abandoned building, before our eyes was a light curtain of rain – and a familiar voice that assaulted our eardrums.

"All right. Stop right there, you two."

The way the voice's owner ordered us in that moment was as if she had "known beforehand" that we would come to the roof. As far as I knew, there was only one person in the world who could manage that feat.

“Touko-san!” “Touko!”

Sousei-san and I cried out at the same time. Our voices echoed across the gloomy roof sprinkled with light rain.

Touko Aoi was here. She was sitting leisurely with her legs crossed atop a rectangular black box like a guitar amp in the center of the roof.

Perhaps it was because she had been exposed to the rain for a long while, but Touko-san’s deep blue shirt was dyed almost black. Drops of water followed the lines of her white neck, flowed along the surface of the pendant at her chest, and finally dripped from the pointed tip of the pendant’s crystal and fell to the concrete floor.

Touko-san was seductive with her hair wet. Coupled with her daring expression, she was bewitching and beautiful.

At this development, just as she had imagined, goosebumps stood up all over my body. I hesitated, at a loss for words. Everything had gone just as she

thought it would. I felt an indescribable fear at having been made to act under someone else's will, like a puppet.

Would I really be able to stop Touko Aoi? She could see the future; would I be able to oppose her? Even though we had finally reached her, what spread ripple-like through my heart was not hope, but overwhelming despair.

Chapter 7: Hope

April 12 Iwato Apartments Rooftop

"…You're late. I got tired of waiting."

Touko-san ran her fingers through her hair, which was soaked and heavy with rain.

As she did, a single pearl-like droplet of water slid smoothly down her forehead. When it finally approached the side of her lips, Touko-san licked it up with the slender red tip of her tongue.

A chill ran down my back. I felt like a frog being watched by a snake.

When I looked, there was a boy gagged, blindfolded, and bound head and foot, cowering beside Touko-san and wearing a frightened expression. He could not have been much older than ten. A middle-schooler; no, perhaps even one of the older elementary-schoolers.

Noticing the direction of my gaze, Touko-san said,

“That’s right, this is Futodama.” Still smiling, she poked the boy’s buttocks with the toes of her high heels. The boy’s whole body jerked stiffly as if ice had been forced down his back.

“He’s still just a child!”

“If a child makes a mistake, isn’t it an adult’s job to fix it?”

Touko-san’s lips twisted in a scornful smile, and she slowly drew a gun from the inside of her dripping wet jacket. Then, unimpressed, she pointed the gun at the boy.

“…Yes, I think so too. But there should be no need to kill him!”

“Are you saying I should feel sorry for him because he’s a child?”

“No, it has nothing to do with whether he’s a child or an adult.”

“Oh, what a coincidence. I think so too. The weight of his sins has nothing to do with whether he’s a

child or an adult."

"That is not what I'm saying!"

"I'll say this: it's just coincidence that Futodama is a child. The result would be the same if he were an adult. The main reason is because he is Futodama. He joined the 'Five Togakushi Judges' of his own free will."

"No! It's not that! Please stop acting like it's only natural for him to die because he's a member of the 'Five Togakushi Judges'! What I'm saying is that there is no good reason to kill someone, no matter who they may be!"

Every inch of my body was quickly becoming drenched by the chilly rain. However, I did not feel the cold at all. Rather, my whole body felt as though it were on fire.

"...Please. Touko-san, do not sully your beautiful hands any further."

"...Impossible. It's too late. My hands are already

stained permanently and won't ever be clean again."

Touko-san laughed a little.

"After all, I've already stolen 'four people's lives' with these hands, you know?"

"...By four people, you speak of Alex Brown, Osamu Haida, Shirou Konno, and – Kyouhei Hioka, correct?"

"...Right, as expected. You figured out exactly what happened with Kyouhei."

"Weren't you the one who gave me the hint and propelled me forward?"

"Oh no, you're embarrassing me. You've seen right through me."

Touko-san gave a self-deprecating smile.

"The meeting between you and Kyouhei Hioka when he was on the verge of death explained one of the mysteries."

"Hmm..." Touko-san's eyes narrowed in interest and

she recrossed her legs.

“The murder methods used in the cases of Alex Brown, known as Tajikarao, and Osamu Haida, known as Omoikane, can be explained by your position as the lead investigator and Kushinada-Hime’s ability ‘Precognition’. However, I find only the case of Shirou Konno, known as Sarutahiko, to be incomprehensible.”

“...Huh? Naoto, even if you say it’s incomprehensible, you know Touko shot Shirou in the head right in front of our eyes, right? Then what the hell is incomprehensible?”

Next to me, Sousei-san raised his voice, saying that in itself was incomprehensible.

“Shirou Konno gave absolutely no response no matter what method we used in the Midnight Site’s Reverse Chat. I find it impossible to understand why he acted in such a conspicuous way as taking a hostage and barricading himself on the roof. He was so much an intellectual that he served as student

council president and he was so cautious that he took great care not to speak with Miyuki Midorikawa, known as Uzume, at school. At that time, he was clearly acting rashly."

"...That's true," Sousei-san muttered.

"When we saw Shirou Konno on the roof, he seemed to me to have been mentally cornered. At the very least, he was not the intellectual, cautious person I had imagined until then. What I deduced from that was that someone had cornered him. And then, when he was cornered, he came out onto center stage, just as that person anticipated."

Again,Touko-san was gazing at me happily like a teacher watching over her student, just as she had when we were standing before the gate.

"From the fact that Shirou Konno repeatedly called out Kagu-tsuchi's name, it's clear that the person who cornered him was Kagu-tsuchi. The problem is how. What method did Kagu-tsuchi use to corner Shirou Konno? Neither we, nor the police, nor

anyone was able to contact Shirou Konno. There had to be a direct method of communication to exert mental pressure on him. In other words, I believe Kagu-tsuchi had to have a way of communicating with Shirou Konno."

"...Doesn't it have something to do with Kyouhei Hioka and Touko meeting right before he died?"

I nodded at Sousei-san's words as I stared at Touko-san.

"Sousei-san, it's already clear from your 'Past Reading' that Kyouhei Hioka died on the fourth floor of Iwato Apartments, correct?"

"Yeah," Sousei-san answered.

"In that case, where is Kyouhei Hioka's body now?"

"...Huh? Where?" Sousei-san spoke hysterically.

"If my logic is correct, Kyouhei Hioka should be resting somewhere within these apartments. Isn't that right? Touko-san?"

When I asked, Touko-san smiled a little and

responded to my question with a question. "…Your reasoning?"

"There are two reasons. One is that it is not simple for you, a woman, to move the body of Kyouhei Hioka, a man. The other is that this is the place Kyouhei Hioka chose to die, and I believe you would respect his wishes."

As usual, Touko-san wore a satisfied expression. Somehow, it did not seem to be a bluff or anything of the sort. It was as if she was truly overjoyed at divulging her secrets to me.

"It is obvious that Touko-san, who dealt with the body, would also control Kyouhei Hioka's possessions. And among those possessions should have been 'the cell phone Kyouhei Hioka stole from Miyuki Midorikawa'. I believe that cell phone was the method of communication with Shirou Konno. At the same time, Kagu-tsuchi's posts were undoubtedly left on the forums with that cell phone."

Immediately after, Touko-san drew something green from her pocket and tossed it on the floor. When I looked, it was a gaudy green cell phone decorated with rhinestones. Most likely, it was Miyuki Midorikawa's cell phone.

"Perfect. Naoto. That was magnificent."

In the next moment, Touko-san clapped her hands, still grasping the gun.

"It's just as you deduced, Naoto. I made Kagutsuchi's posts on this phone. Shirou Konno's mail address was on there too. With that address, I repeatedly sent him messages with nothing but 'No matter where you hide, I'll surely find and kill you.'"

Touko-san stated in a bored tone.

"It's true that Shirou Konno was an intellectual and cautious person, but since he hid himself so quickly, he also had to be nervous and cowardly. I figured he would slip up sooner or later if he was cornered. It was just as I expected. But I might've pushed him too far. I really didn't think he'd take a hostage and

barricade himself on the roof."

Touko-san snorted scornfully.

"...Touko-san, you are a frightening person."

I felt only fear at the accuracy of her predictive abilities, as exhibited until now in her role as a detective. On top of that, she could see ten minutes into the future with her Persona's ability, and so it was only natural that she could anticipate everyone's actions, including my own.

"You two did everything just as I expected. Like Naoto guessed, I gave you a little hint and you reached me. I've been waiting for you to come with the right answer. And now, the two of you are here."

Touko-san's perfectly clear eyes proved that her words were no mere bluff.

"I don't care what anyone thinks of me. I've come this far, living the way I believe in. So I don't care if everyone despises me and curses me and resents me forever as a traitor and a murderer. And that's

because I know that's the only way I can live... But even though I'm this uncharming, somehow it seems like even I have a bit of a cute side."

Touko-san smiled wryly. Her face with that slightly embarrassed smile was so innocent that it did not at all look like that of someone who had killed four people.

"I don't want much. Just a little is fine. Naoto, I wanted you to know the truth, why I made these kinds of choices. You're free to think what you want of me now that you know. I don't know when to quit, and maybe I just wanted to leave some proof that I existed in this world, no matter how small."

These were her true feelings. In truth, that Tohru Momochi, known as Futodama, had not yet been killed may have been because she wanted us to witness the completion of her work.

"And so you requested that I join the investigation and partnered me with Sousei-san?"

Most likely, when he was on the verge of death,

Kyouhei Hioka had felt the same way as Touko-san did now. In his dying moments, he just wanted Touko-san to understand. He wanted her to remember.

"...Like we discussed before, you and Sousei might've had some compatibility as fellow Persona users, but the main reason was because I'm fond of you two, you know? So I chose to entrust my dying message to the two of you."

Touko-san smiled mischievously. I was not smiling at all. I understood.

–In the next moment, Touko-san extended her arm holding the gun in our direction. At the same time, a gunshot rang out and a bullet bounced on the concrete. Gunpowder smoke rose from the muzzle.

"–Sousei, it's bad manners to move around when people are talking. Behave yourself for a bit longer, please."

Touko-san's sharp gaze was directed at Sousei-san, who was huddled low to the ground. "...Che." I

thought he had been quiet for a while, and it seemed he had been waiting for an opening to subdue Touko-san.

“D-Don’t screw with me! Touko!”

Then Sousei-san stomped the concrete floor stubbornly with one foot.

“I get it! You plan to ‘die here’! Right now, you look the same as ‘Yuuri’ did the last time I saw her! This being your ‘dying moment’… I’m absolutely fucking against that!”

I felt the same way as Sousei-san. Just like Kyouhei Hioka, Touko-san thought of making this apartment building full of memories her final stage.

“…Right, right, I should warn you two. Don’t make the mistake of getting too close to me. Do you know what this black box is that I’m sitting on?”

Saying that, Touko-san rapped the black wooden box with her fingertips.

“You know, this is the ‘time bomb’ Kyouhei brought

from the station."

It was written in the database entry on Kyouhei Hioka. Along with a gun and bullets, Kyouhei Hioka had taken a bomb that had been seized as evidence from a bomb maniac's house and kept at the station for safekeeping.

"Originally it was set by Kyouhei, and it's not my specialty so I don't really know the details, but from looking inside the box, I get the feeling it's just a simple bomb with an in-line detonator."

Touko-san slid to the side of her seat and lifted the top of the box, letting us see inside.

"I was involved too, so I know the crazy guy who made these bombs wasn't just touched in the head, but also a sore loser. There are a lot of dummy wires in here."

Red, blue, yellow, and green colorful cords were crowded together inside the box.

"Even if I knew about this stuff, it would take too

much luck to disable the bomb's timer. It can't be stopped once it's started the countdown. In other words, what I'm trying to say is – no one can stop me now!"

"It can't be! Touko-san, you can't mean that!"

"By the way, it seems this bomb – has got enough power to obliterate these rundown apartments, you know?"

Right. She meant to end everything in this apartment building full of memories, the place where Kyouhei Hioka slept. And she meant to take Futodama with her.

"It's mission complete if I kill the last of the 'Five Togakushi Judges'. Then all I have to do is hit the detonation switch, look back on my disgusting life as the timer counts down, and it'll all end while I'm laughing at what a stupid woman I was."

Even though she only had a gun and bomb, there was nothing we could do, and in addition, she could see the future. She would have predicted our

actions. In reality, we, the police, and the members of the "Five Togakushi Judges" – everyone had acted as she expected up until now.

Was there anything we could do? Was there really no helping it? It felt as if I would be crushed by my feeling of unease. At that time, wanting to rely on someone, I glanced unthinkingly to the side.

When I did, the person next to me was restlessly looking around the roof with a sharp glint in his eye. Somehow, it seemed he had again been looking for an opening in which to secure Touko-san.

Right now, seeing his unyielding attitude, I felt that he was more reliable than anyone.

"...This concerns your criminal motive, but Touko-san, you told me your serial murders of the 'Five Togakushi Judges' were not to carry on Kyouhei Hioka's will."

My partner had not yet given up. And so it would be rude of me not to call upon every last ounce of my strength.

“You said it wasn’t because you wanted revenge against the people who drove Kyouhei Hioka crazy. In that case, I believe it’s likely that you are consigning the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’ to oblivion through your will alone, Touko-san.”

I had no goal in mind. I most definitely did not have a plan. On the other hand, I could not allow myself to stop. For now, I had no choice but to struggle as much as I could. That was all I could do as a detective.

“The hint was in your past conversation with Kyouhei Hioka from six years ago. The conversation concerning your past. The past where your parents were killed by a criminal. The merciless attitude toward criminals you’ve shown a few times before. Touko-san, don’t you completely loathe more than just the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’, but all those who are complicit in crimes? In that case, though you’ve taken over Kyouhei Hioka’s murder plans, you could tell me that you are not carrying on his will, correct?”

Touko-san looked up at the cloudy sky.

"...I hate talking about the past. It only brings back bad memories. So the only ones I've told about my past are Kyouhei and Yuuri. And those two are gone now."

Touko-san stared closely at the dark, heavy clouds, as if peering through them.

"It's not a nice story. Do you still want to hear it?"

"...Yes. I want to know more about you." I nodded firmly.

"We won't get it if you don't tell us!" Sousei-san declared curtly.

"...Thanks." Touko-san laughed a little.

"–I was a first-year in middle school. When my family went out on a bus trip, our bus was hijacked. The culprit was a young man in his early twenties. I've already forgotten what the hijacker's goal was and what he asked for. I'm sure it must've been something worthless. Anyway, I clearly remember

the man was a piece of trash who wasn't right in the head."

In my mind's eye, I saw Touko-san as a young girl.

"The man had a long carving knife in his hand. The first person he stabbed with that blade was my father, a police officer. My father tried to subdue the man but messed up. The next sacrifice was my mother, who screamed when she saw my father collapsed on the ground, covered in blood. And then the tour guide, and the conductor, and the regular customers. The man killed passengers one after another like a man-eating tiger with a taste for human blood."

Touko-san's figure was terribly vivid in the gently falling rain as she spoke steadily, her face expressionless.

"At the time, all I could do was cower trembling in my seat, unable to say a thing. I was terrified. But I didn't get what was happening. Why did this have to happen to my family when we only went out on a

trip? Why did my parents have to be killed when they hadn't done anything wrong? It felt like my brain would explode at how impossible it all was."

The middle-school girl had experienced the irrationality of having her parents stabbed to death for no reason right in front of her eyes. I thought there could be nothing crueler.

"And then finally the man made me his target. But I was saved by the driver's quick thinking. The driver swerved quickly, and the man lost his balance and I was just barely saved. Of course, the man was infuriated and killed the driver. I was a kid, but even I knew what would happen to a bus if the driver died. When the bus started drifting, the man lost his balance, fell over, hit the back of his head hard against the floor, and lost consciousness. Us surviving passengers were happy when he passed out. But the bus would crash at that rate and we might die along with the crazy man. That was when I spaced out, sat down in the blood-covered driver's seat, and held on tight to the steering wheel. Of

course, there was no way a middle-schooler like me would know how to drive. I just felt like we would definitely die if no one did anything. Just that feeling made me move."

Touko-san spread her arms wide.

"As you can see, I'm still alive. In the end, the bus stopped safely, the hijacker was arrested by police who rushed to the scene, and everyone applauded me as a heroic middle-schooler."

Touko-san's mouth twisted and she cast down her eyes.

"That time, I was saved by Kushidana-Hime. That's right. I saw 'a future where I will be saved'. In that life-or-death situation, pushed to my limits, I wished I wouldn't die from the bottom of my heart. Like an idiot, I really thought I might be saved if I could see the future. And then my Persona awakened. Of course, it wasn't ten minutes ahead like it is now; I'd just awakened, so I could only see ten seconds into the future. But it was enough to see the bus

stopping."

Touko-san looked between Sousei-san and me.

"The Persona abilities you two received are a result of what you strongly wished for in your hearts, right?"

True, I had strongly wished for the power to support someone when it had seemed that I would be killed by Sousei-san when he went berserk. Undoubtedly, Sousei-san had also strongly wished for the power to see the past.

"...By the way, what do you think happened to the hijacker who was arrested after that?"

In the next moment, Touko-san's expressionless gaze turned so cold I could feel the chill in the air.

"The man pleaded insanity and was judged not guilty."

It was by no means an uncommon occurrence. If abnormal results were detected in a psychiatric examination, the criminal was not held legally

accountable at the time of the crime and was sent to a psychiatric institution. In the case of a severe disability, they would be isolated and receive medical treatment. And then the criminal would live out the remainder of his life in the institution.

It could be said that this was a typical outcome, but the victims surely felt conflicted.

Touko-san's mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"It's like a joke, right? Something that ridiculous? Is it really okay for something this weird to happen? The dissatisfaction I felt when I heard the news... I can't put it into words. I wasn't angry or sad or mourning, just detached. That was when I was convinced. Crimes were absurd. The criminals who committed those absurd crimes couldn't be judged with common sense at all."

However, her eyes were not smiling.

"I joined the police because I wanted to use the law as a front to exterminate criminals. Even today I try to mercilessly crack down on the criminals I come

across."

I believed there was no reason for Touko-san to lie now that we had come this far. In addition, it was not as if I could not understand what she was saying.

"That's why it's not surprising for me to kill the 'Five Togakushi Judges' like this, right? It's nothing more than my life's work, you know?"

People like Touko-san who had had tragic life experiences in the past sometimes held twisted values like those she spoke of. I could hardly say it was impossible.

"...I don't believe you."

However, I knew her, and so there was an unerasable sense of unease within me.

"At the very least, the Touko Aoi I know is an amazing detective! Even if you harbor such thoughts within you, surely you are aware of the duty a detective must carry out!"

"Yeah, I think so too. Everyone knows Touko's got

no mercy for criminals. I think there's definitely something wrong this time, but everything before that totally made sense."

At my words, Sousei-san immediately agreed. Right. If it was someone who knew Touko Aoi well, they could not possibly accept what she was currently saying.

Touko-san was silent and did not respond. She wore an uncomfortable expression. From that, I reached a single conclusion.

"...Touko-san, wasn't it the case that Kyouhei Hioka was something like a 'brake' to you?"

I remembered Kyouhei Hioka's words from when they had been living together. He had desperately tried to persuade her. He had strongly admonished her that her way of thinking was incorrect. These were words he had uttered after hearing of Touko-san's tragic past and her opposition to criminals, just like ours right now.

In other words, Touko-san had been able to cultivate

the image of an unflappable detective because she had had a safety device named Kyouhei Hioka.

"...I'm not denying it. It's pretty clear if you look at me now that Kyouhei's gone. I don't want to admit it, but I acted like a decent person because Kyouhei was a brake."

Touko-san's eyes narrowed and she smiled weakly. Perhaps she was envisioning Kyouhei Hioka in days gone by.

"...Touko-san, please let me ask you one more thing–"

I seized upon this as the critical moment.

"–Why did you kill Kyouhei Hioka?"

I inquired forcefully.

"We know from the past conversation that he himself wanted it to be so. Nevertheless, why did you have to bear that painful, heavy responsibility?"

Touko-san's expression gave away even less than it had before.

"...It's not like the thought of just watching over Kyouhei as he died didn't cross my mind."

"Then why!"

"One reason is because that was what he wanted, like you said, Naoto. Another is that I couldn't forgive him. I absolutely couldn't forgive him for getting himself killed by a criminal. If I couldn't save his life, I thought I would end it with my own hands. That's all."

The events at the main gate, after she had shot and killed Shirou Konno. I remembered how Touko-san had ordered us in an unusually rude tone.

"Even so! Why!? You knew exactly what would happen to you if you lost your brake, Kyouhei Hioka!"

Why had I not been by her side? Why had I not been able to stop Touko-san?

Even if I regretted it, there was still nothing I could have done. We walked separate paths in life. Even

so, I found it frustrating. If I had been by her side, perhaps I would have been able to listen to what she had to say.

After she seemed to hesitate for a moment:

"...That's why. Kyouhei was in the way of me being Kagu-tsuchi."

Touko-san murmured emotionlessly.

"There was no point in just taking care of him when he was already dying. For me to become Kagu-tsuchi, it was necessary for me to sever the chains Kyouhei had on me with my own hands."

When Touko-san spoke of "becoming Kagu-tsuchi", she meant "becoming a demon". A "murderous demon", at that.

"Why!? Kyouhei Hioka did not wish for you to become Kagu-tsuchi! Touko-san, Kyouhei Hioka did not mean for you to take over his revenge!"

"...That's right. I was the one who wanted to be Kagu-tsuchi. Kyouhei wasn't the kind of person who

would want that from me. I know that better than anyone even without you telling me, Naoto. And–"

In the next moment, Touko-san furrowed her brow and bit her lower lip, as if in pain.

"–I also know better than anyone that I was the one responsible for killing him."

"Y-You were responsible? What do you mean…?"

Naturally, I was at a loss for words. I could not even begin to guess her meaning.

It was an incident full of malice. It was a tragic series of misfortunes with no one to blame. Nonetheless, if I had to pinpoint the one responsible, all of those involved were responsible to some extent.

It was true that Touko-san had dealt the finishing blow. However, I did not think that Touko-san was as responsible as she claimed for the events leading up to Kyouhei Hioka's death. To the contrary, I remembered that she had earlier gone so far as to warn Kyouhei Hioka, 'Please stop being foolish.' If I

thought about it, it was possible that she would feel responsible for not being able to stop him, but was that really the case?

Touko-san let out a great sigh. Her breath contained a slight tremble.

"...Like you'd expect, even I shook when I pointed the gun at Kyouhei. But only for a short time until I pulled the trigger. After I fired, it was like my blood froze over. My body and my heart grew cold, and I no longer felt sad or lonely or anything."

Touko-san gave a bewitching smile that sent a shiver down my spine.

"...Since I overcame Kyouhei, I could go back to being my former self. But when I was killing those 'Five Togakushi Judges', my heart didn't ache at all. I had stopped being human. Back then, when I crossed the line and killed Kyouhei, I became a demon."

Wearing a resolute expression that said she had accepted her imminent death, Touko-san said:

“All right, that’s enough. We’ve gone over everything I wanted to talk about. Naoto, Sousei, I’m happy I could meet you at the end. Take care of yourselves, you two.”

I realized that she still carried her “hidden feelings” deep within her heart.

In that moment, Touko-san tightly clutched the pendant at her chest. “Answer me, Kushinada-Hime!” Her Persona manifested behind her, graceful like a celestial maiden.

“W-Wait! I’m not yet done speaking!”

I cried out desperately, but Touko-san’s hand did not stop. She stubbornly pressed the bomb’s activation switch with the bottom of the gun’s magazine.

In the next moment, red digital numbers appeared on the front of the black box. The numbers displayed read [10:00]. Immediately the countdown began: [09:59].

“–It’s just as you see. You’ve got just under ten

minutes. The two of you don't need to die. You should be able to get far away in ten minutes. Leave these apartments now."

The rain had started falling harder and thunder was roaring in the faraway sky without my noticing.

"By the way, the two of you remember the ability of my Kushinada-Hime, right?"

When Touko-san mentioned it, I understood the meaning behind the time limit placed on the bomb.

"...You can see ten minutes into the future – so what kind of future do you see ten minutes from now, Touko-san...?"

Touko-san spread out her hands.

"Nothing. I don't see anything. It's the first time this has happened."

What did this mean? I wore a dubious expression.

"...Why don't I see anything in the future? Most likely, that's because ten minutes from now – I'm no longer alive. By the way, my foresight is never

wrong. No matter what you do, you can't save me. Give up and get out of here!"

Her voice said she had abandoned reality. In this desperate situation, I was as unable to move as if I had been struck.

"What're you doing just standing around!? Naoto! I'll go!"

In the next moment, Sousei-san had started running toward Touko-san. Touko-san immediately lifted the gun.

"I'll shoot! Stop, Sousei!"

"If you're gonna shoot me, just do it! Sorry, I'm a robot! I'm not as weak as a human! One or two shots mean nothing to me!"

He would risk himself for this opportunity. Sousei-san was prepared to be shot if it meant stopping Touko-san.

"...Who said I'll shoot you, Sousei?"

"S-Sousei-san, wait! Stop!"

Right then, I shouted loudly. That was because the one Touko-san leisurely pointed the gun's muzzle at was not Sousei-san, but Futodama.

"Dammit! Why're you stopping me!?"

Brought to an abrupt halt, Sousei-san glared at me and yelled.

"Are you saying it's okay if Touko dies!?"

"Of course not! But Futodama is a hostage! Look closely!"

"Like I care! It's the brat's own damn fault if he dies! It's reaping what he fucking sowed! Anyway, at this rate Touko and the brat will both die when the bomb goes off! So I'm not gonna hesitate to choose Touko's life!"

Sousei-san's claim was correct. Honestly, I thought the same thing.

"Or else what! Are you just gonna leave the fucking building like Touko said!? Then I really am gonna break off my partnership with you! I'll manage just

fine on my own! You know! I'm not gonna let someone important to me die right in front of me again!"

Sousei-san's bitter yell reached up to the cloudy sky. At the same time, it pierced through my heart.

"...Sousei-san, please give me just a little more time. I still have questions for Touko-san."

Touko-san's eyes were closed, as if she was focusing on the sound of the falling rain. Her confident behavior spoke of her unshakeable conviction that we could not overturn the current situation.

"'Just a little'! Don't you get it, Naoto? The time bomb's countdown keeps going while we're fucking chatting like this!"

Sousei-san's voice was full of impatience.

"And also! Touko said it before! Taking apart the bomb is fucking impossible! Once the countdown starts, no one can stop the explosion! So we all we can do is grab Touko and leave the building while

there's still time!"

"Sousei-san, please! Give me time!"

Most likely, we could not solve this with brute force. We would not reach Touko-san. In that case, our only remaining method was to stop her walking the path of destruction through her own choice. To do that, Sousei-san and I would have to put our all into conveying our feelings to her.

"...Please. Trust me. We will definitely stop Touko-san."

I looked steadily at Sousei-san.

"...Not fair... That 'trust me' bullshit. Like you have any right to say that! After you fucking betrayed me!"

Speaking rudely, Sousei-san dropped heavily to a seat on the concrete floor. Then he sat cross-legged and crossed his arms violently.

"Oi! Naoto! Make damn well sure you stop Touko! If you betray me this time, I'll make you pay!"

If I was unable to persuade her this time, he could do nothing to me. Knowing that, Sousei-san entrusted his life to me. I nodded at Sousei-san and turned to face Touko-san.

"...We have resolved ourselves. Will we persuade you here? Or will we meet our demise with the building? It's one or the other."

In the next moment, Touko-san stood up and yelled, her voice shaking.

"Don't be so stupid! No matter what you do, you can't change the future! I don't want to drag you two into this!"

It seemed Touko-san had not anticipated that we would possibly remain when presented with such a desperate situation.

"Don't say such selfish things! Weren't you the one who summoned us here? And now you are telling us to go back. There is no way we would simply agree and withdraw. You're stuck with us for a while longer!"

And then something else happened I did not anticipate.

“Naoto! Sousei! Listen to me! Please! I’m begging you, leave this place immediately!”

Touko-san was agitated. It seemed she had been telling the truth when she said she was fond of us. Touko-san wore an unusually desperate expression that said she really did not want to let us die.

I was honestly happy to learn that truth, but unfortunately, I had no time to savor my joy. When I looked at the digital display on the front of the bomb, it read [08:37]. It was already approaching eight minutes.

“Please tell me. Touko-san, what is this ‘responsibility’ you speak of? Are you saying you did something to Kyouhei Hioka?”

I spoke quickly, aware of the time remaining.

“…Not just Kyouhei. Now that it’s like this, I feel responsible for you and Sousei too.”

Touko-san covered her face with one hand and shook her head.

"...That's how it is, right? You guys are in danger now just because you met me! You've met with misfortune just from having to do with a woman like me!"

I could not believe my ears.

"...Please, wait a moment. Touko-san, are you saying you feel responsible for those who have anything to do with you?"

"...Yeah, that's right."

Touko-san nodded a little. Her expression was completely serious.

I was astonished. What kind of life must one have led to honestly believe that, as Touko-san did?

"No! You're wrong! There's no need for you to feel responsible for such a thing! In fact, I do not want you to feel responsible. When it comes down to it, I am the one responsible for staying here. It's the

same for you, right, Sousei-san?"

"Well, yeah! My thoughts and actions and everything aren't anyone else's but mine! Even if I'm wrong or mess up, no way I'll do something lame like blame it on someone else!"

"It was the same for Kyouhei Hioka, six years ago! And when he was on the verge of death! Touko-san, not once did he blame the fact that he met you! Just the opposite! Just before he died, he said if he was reborn, one more time, with you–"

"–Stop! Naoto! Don't say any more!"

Touko-san's loud voice like a scream drowned out my yell.

"Don't lie to yourself! He still loved you! Kyouhei Hioka loved you up until the moment he died! And Touko-san, you loved him too!"

"No! Don't talk as if you know! You don't know anything about us, Naoto!"

Touko-san's wet, heavy hair swung wildly.

“Then what about the ‘pendant’ you wear around your neck, Touko-san!? That’s the birthstone pendant Kyouhei Hioka gave you six years ago for your birthday, isn’t it?”

Touko-san gripped the crystal of the pendant chain as if in reaction to my words.

“You take great care of the pendant you received from Kyouhei Hioka even after you parted ways. It’s proof that you still love him even now!”

Touko-san was silent as she clutched the pendant.

“…Touko-san. Trying to bear everything on your own is a mistake.”

I was stating what Tsuge-san had told me.

“Touko-san, if you had just said you wanted his help, Kyouhei Hioka would have gladly protected you. Living while relying on others is not something unacceptable. Even something too heavy for you to handle alone sometimes becomes bearable with two people. Touko-san, you should have trusted and

relied on the people around you more."

Honestly, who was I to talk? Until recently, the same could often be said to me. It was just that I had fortunately experienced some events in Inaba, met irreplaceable people I could call my friends, and spent irreplaceable time with them, and so I had been able to change. I had come to a realization.

Two was better than one, and many was better than two. Humans could become stronger just by having several people precious to them.

Touko-san's shoulders were trembling slightly. In the next moment, her dry laughter echoed across the roof.

"You don't get it! You don't get it at all, Naoto! You can only think that way because you're a completely honest person! Being able to depend on someone is just wishful thinking for a broken woman like me!"

Touko-san's expression distorted painfully.

"...My parents died, but the bus hijacker is alive.

That absurdity broke me. People have a twisted sense of value. Yuuri and Kyouhei and Tsuge-san. I was only able to miraculously keep myself from running wild because of the righteous people around me. Right. The truth is, I was always on the edge. Whenever I slapped handcuffs on a criminal, whenever I prepped my gun to threaten criminals, every time, I thought of throwing logic out the door and just blowing out their shit-filled brains…"

"…Touko-san, could that be the reason you left Kyouhei Hioka's side?"

Why had the two parted ways when they were mutually attracted to each other? I had found that strange, and now I was finally able to comprehend it.

"…That's right. I was scared. I thought someday I would go wild and make Kyouhei unhappy. It's already bad enough imagining your lover turning into a murderer!"

Touko-san smiled self-deprecatingly.

"...But in the end I made him unhappy anyway. You guys got involved too, so you get it, right? Kyouhei Hioka, the model detective overflowing with a sense of justice, shouldn't have dirtied his hands with murder! It's impossible! But that impossible thing actually happened!"

"...T-Touko-san, you can't possibly be saying that Kyouhei Hioka committed murder because of your influence?"

"Can you think of any other reason? That's the only possibility! I planted those crazy thoughts in him!"

The sound of falling rain had grown stronger. Droplets of rain danced atop the concrete like popcorn popping.

"I didn't tell Kyouhei to stop being foolish out of a sense of conscience or morality. I'm broken, and from the very beginning I didn't care what happened to the 'Five Togakushi Judges'. I just thought that I didn't want to let an honest person like him walk the same path as a broken person like

me. I thought I didn't want to make him any unhappier because of me."

Touko-san was dripping wet, and it looked to me as if her whole body was crying.

"...Just before he died, Kyouhei called me saying he'd messed up. You know. To tell the truth, I was happy. Not just because he chose me in his dying moments, but because he was only able to kill one person. If you think about it, would you believe Kyouhei, who excelled even among detectives, would be shot by a civilian like Shirou Konno?"

I remembered the words "too soft" had appeared in the conversation held during his dying moments. Most likely, in the end, he had been unable to completely become a demon. The reason Kyouhei Hioka had not said a word when he had killed Miyuki Midorikawa may have been because he could not rid himself of his guilty conscience.

"Kyouhei wasn't completely broken. That's a slight comfort to me."

At last, I clearly understood the responsibility that Touko-san spoke of.

“In the end, I decided to carry on Kyouhei’s work and consign all members of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’ to oblivion. But like I said before, I originally thought all criminals should be eliminated, so I feel just a little guilty for making Kyouhei unhappy…”

Touko-san bent over a little and gripped the pendant at her chest all the more tightly.

“…You’re right. I still love Kyouhei even now. But. No matter what, I couldn’t let that love be fulfilled. But Kyouhei died just because he loved a broken woman like me.”

Touko-san sent a fleeting glance at the digital display on the bomb. The numbers [06:25] blinked red.

“…There’s no time. Go. I’ve told you everything. There’s nothing left to talk about.”

Touko-san ordered quietly. She once again dropped

to a seat on the black box and closed her eyes. Only the digital beeping of the countdown and the systematic sound of the rain echoed across the rooftop.

I searched the past conversations within my memory and gathered the most appropriate words to say to her now. After that, I slowly let out a single large sigh and began to speak.

"*'There's no way I'm not just gonna sit back and watch you fall, Touko.'*"

In the next moment, Touko-san's closed eyes opened and her expression changed to one of surprise. There was no need for me to explain to her whose line it was.

"...Naoto, stop it."

"*'I definitely won't let you do anything that ridiculous as long as I live.'*"

"Didn't you hear me tell you to stop!?"

"*'If you try, I'll risk my own life to stop you.'*"

“P-Please, stop!”

Touko-san gazed at me in anguish. The pendant at her chest shook as if connected to the wavering of her heart.

“No! I won’t stop until you understand, Touko-san!”

I expressed my true feelings to her.

“Touko-san, if you say you need a brake! Then I’ll be your brake! I’ll say it again! Don’t try to bear everything by yourself! You are definitely not alone!”

If this was to be my last chance, I would express to her all of what I felt so that I would have no regrets.

“Kyouhei Hioka is no longer here. Yuuri-san isn’t here either. But Tsuge-san is still here! Sousei-san is here! And of course, I as well!”

Touko-san’s whole body was shivering slightly as if frozen. In the next moment, she collapsed to her knees on the concrete.

“...Please. Stop it. Don’t speak so kindly to me

anymore. Don't let me hope for anything. Don't make me think I want to live–"

"That's impossible. Touko-san, weren't you telling me 'Help me' from the beginning?"

Touko-san's eyes narrowed at my words. In addition, not just her, but Sousei-san also wore a strange expression. "...Huh? Really?"

"I thought it was strange ever since I realized Touko-san was Kagu-tsuchi. When I was putting together a timeline of the incidents connected to the murders, I calculated that Miyuki Midorikawa and then Kyouhei Hioka died a short while before Touko-san submitted the investigation request to me."

Their puzzlement was understandable. She had not told me directly, and in the end it was only my interpretation.

"If you think about it, normally the request to me as a detective would only be to the detriment of Touko-san's plan, correct? Moreover, it was not the idea of

the police, but Touko-san's own wish, so it becomes increasingly more difficult to understand."

I slowly began walking toward Touko-san.

"That was when I realized. In the end, wasn't it a message from Touko-san saying 'I want you to stop me'?"

I went down to my knees in front of Touko-san. I tightly gripped her wet, chilly hands and told her, gazing straight into her eyes:

"I apologize for the wait. My name is Naoto Shirogane, detective – and I've come to save you, Touko Aoi-san."

I smiled sweetly and continued.

"...Even if you say that no longer holds, I'll refuse to accept it. Touko-san, I am still inferior to you in just about everything, but even so, I don't think I'll lose to you in terms of stubbornness."

The one who picked up from there was that person.

"Too bad, Touko, just give up. Naoto's stubbornness is ingrained in her, you know? As her partner, my great self can vouch for how damn stubborn she always is."

For a short while, Touko-san's gaze wandered between Sousei-san and me, but finally she hung her head and grumbled in a hoarse voice, "...Right.

"...I lose. It's my loss."

Was she soaked by the rain? Or by her tears? In any case, Touko-san's face was twisted and disheveled.

"...I lose if I'm happy... But I was glad... When you told me you would save me, I was really glad..."

But Touko-san's expression was extremely bright and happy. That was why I was so happy I could cry. However, I had no time to savor the moment.

"We did it, Naoto! But still! We don't have time to relax!"

Sousei-san came running toward us as he raised his voice. When he mentioned it, I looked at the numbers on the bomb. The remaining time was [04:58], less than five minutes.

"Oi oi, what do we do? Toss the bomb outside the building?"

Sousei-san circled the black box.

"Damn! No good! We can't pick it up or anything! The bomb's secured to the concrete! Fuck! Can we make it in four minutes? If we run as fast as we can..."

"...Impossible."

Then Touko-san spoke in a weak voice.

"...Huh? You're talking like that again! Touko!"

“That’s not it. I’m saying it’s physically impossible. The bomb isn’t just secured to the concrete but also set up in a way that prevents our escape – it’s secured to my body.”

I followed Touko-san’s gaze. A cord was tied between her ankle and the bomb. In truth, Touko-san had not moved one step away from the bomb.

“Wait a sec! I’ll just tear something like that off! Don’t underestimate a robot’s power!”

“Sousei. Weren’t you listening to me? It’s impossible. Aren’t you forgetting who the perpetrator was who lured you to this place?”

“…Oi oi. Are you serious? Gimme a break.”

“It’s impossible even if you try. There’s no way I would fail to set up countermeasures against your abilities as a robot, Sousei. …This cord is woven with diamond fibers. It’s very tough. You definitely can’t break it without an electric cutter.”

To think that her skills would work against us at a

time like this. It was terribly ironic.

“Leave me and escape, you two. If you want to take Futodama with you, do what you want.”

Futodama had lost consciousness, possibly due to fear. Sousei-san was more than capable of carrying just one boy and running.

“...Thank you. I’m truly grateful to the two of you. Thanks to you, I was able to have a happy dream in the end. Now I can join Kyouhei and Yuuri without regrets.”

Touko-san revealed earnestly.

“Sousei-san, I have a request for you!”

There was no time to worry. The clock was ticking down even as we spoke.

“Take Futodama and escape right now!”

“What’re you gonna do, Naoto!?”

“I will stay here and stop the bomb!”

“Naoto!” “Idiot!” Touko-san and Sousei-san yelled at

the same time.

“There is no other way to stop Touko-san!”

“Then I’m staying here!”

“You can’t! We cannot involve Futodama! If the last of the ‘Five Togakushi Judges’ dies, our efforts will have been in vain!”

I met Sousei-san’s eyes and entreated him with all my heart.

“Please! Trust me!”

Sousei-san looked distressed and mussed up his hair with both hands.

“Ahh! Geez! Damn! Do you think I’ll do whatever you fucking say if you tell me to trust you!?”

In the next moment, Sousei-san lifted the boy lying beside the bomb as lightly as if he were a picking up a ragdoll. He began to run to the edge of the roof with all his strength, just as if he were a rugby player.

As I watched Sousei-san run like the wind, I suddenly realized. At some point, the rain had stopped.

“Naoto, you fucking idiooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooot!”

Unbelievably, Sousei-san kicked down the rusted fence with one foot and leapt from the roof into the gray sky. Several seconds later, a crashing noise reminiscent of an automobile accident resounded from a few floors below.

“S-Sousei-san!”

The roof of a five-story building was almost twenty meters above the ground. Even if Sousei-san was a robot, I had to wonder if he was unhurt.

“...You two have turned into an amazing team in such a short time.”

Touko-san was gazing into the empty air where Sousei-san had vanished as if dazzled. It was a gaze full of the affection that she had shown us many

times before.

Just like Sousei-san had seen his mother Yuuri-san in Touko-san, Touko-san had also come to feel for and watch over Sousei-san, her best friend's orphan, as if he were her own child.

I dropped to a sitting position from where I had been crouching and turned my gaze to the bomb.

In truth, I felt the urge to run up to the edge of the roof and peer down to confirm that Sousei-san was uninjured. However, I chose to trust that he was fine, just as he trusted me.

"...Hey, Naoto. Forget about me and run. It's only natural I should die. You don't need to worry about what happens to me."

I ignored Touko-san's attempt to persuade me and opened the lid of the guitar amp. Just as when I had first seen it, the inside was that of a simple bomb. However, there were numerous dummy leads, and I hesitated, completely unable to tell which to cut to halt the detonator.

“So this is the so-called ‘wire dilemma’…”

I muttered to myself. The person who made the bomb may have been rather fond of movies. “Red or blue, which lead should I cut?” That sort of situation happened countless times in old Hollywood films. Though of course, I had never even imagined I myself would encounter such circumstances in reality.

“N-Naoto! Listen to me! I said it before, it’s absolutely impossible! The chances of stopping this bomb without expert knowledge are just about zero!”

I felt sorry that I had chosen to ignore her, but I was not in the mood to be persuaded by Touko-san. That was because I did not have the option to run. Nevertheless, it was also true that I could not find a method to break through this dangerous situation.

I deliberated as I gazed steadily at the inside of the bomb’s box. I called upon every ounce of the knowledge I had accumulated until now in my work

as a detective and searched for a ray of hope.

However, all that came to me was a sense of impatience, and no ideas presented themselves.

I checked the digital display. [03:59]. The remaining time was finally approaching three minutes. Unless I leapt down like Sousei-san, it was already unlikely that I would escape.

"...You really are a stupid girl."

Touko-san expelled a huge cloud of air from her lungs. She sighed as if waving a white flag.

"–The bomb maniac called this time bomb 'Colorful'."

"Hm? What's wrong? You're suddenly cooperative."

"Don't give me that. Naoto. You didn't give me a choice in this situation. Those dirty tactics will serve you well in the future."

When I feigned ignorance, Touko-san responded in a disgusted tone.

“Thank you. Then we can’t let this be the end, for the sake of my future as well.”

The corners of my mouth lifted, and Touko-san gave a slight snort in response. I was being a little malicious without regard to appearances.

To put it simply, I was “threatening Touko-san by using myself as a hostage”.

If she were alone, Touko-san would not hesitate in accepting death, but she absolutely did not want to involve me, so in the end, she would surely cooperate. That was what I had believed.

“I’ll explain. The origin of the nickname ‘Colorful’ is because there are eleven leads of eleven colors in total inside the bomb. Red, blue, purple, green, gray, brown, navy, pink, yellow, black, white. Don’t mess this part up. To disable the timer, the one who set the bomb picked one of the leads as the last one to leave. Got it? I’ll say it again. You can’t just cut any one of the leads to disable the timer. You have to leave only the one wire you absolutely shouldn’t cut

and cut the other ten."

"...In other words, it's necessary to get ten correct in succession..."

The extremely high degree of difficulty had me at a loss for words.

"That's why I said it's impossible. It's all over. No matter how good your luck is, not just one or two, but ten in a row is nothing short of impossible..."

I felt my heart sink at the words, heavy as lead, that Touko-san revealed.

No matter how I stared, it was only a waste of time. I grasped the leads in my fingertips and checked the colors and materials. However, all I obtained was a new despair: without the tools, we would be completely unable to cut the leads.

"...If there's a chance, it's with the one who set the bomb, who knows which one to leave."

My fingertips stopped moving completely. I noticed a bit of unease in Touko-san's words.

It was at that moment. I heard a noisy sound downstairs like something crashing.

I strained my ears. There was a sound like metal and concrete colliding and a sound like the engine of a motorbike. The sounds steadily grew closer and finally echoed from the staircase.

“Sousei Kurogami! Has arrived!”

In the next moment, the front wheel of a red bike leapt out from the entrance to the stairs like the forelegs of a neighing horse.

Sheets of water flew from the bike’s tires. He changed to human form and skidded to a stop in front of Touko-san and me.

Seeing Sousei-san’s body covered with scratches, I understood the source of the crashing noises. He was not just scratched, as if he had been moving about quite recklessly, but there were dents here and there on his body and one part where his inner mechanisms were visible.

I gazed steadily at Sousei-san and thought of complaining.

“I-I’ll say it now! I made sure to leave that brat somewhere far away from the apartments! Anyway, I came back ‘cause I wanted to, so you can’t complain!”

Sousei-san rambled on and on as if making excuses.

I checked the digital display. [03:38]. I calculated roughly one minute and ten seconds before Sousei-san had come back. He had not hesitated at all to return.

“You’re late. I grew tired of waiting.”

“Y-You! I came back full speed full throttle!”

“You two really are a good team.”

It was an extreme situation, but having an amiable exchange with amiable people felt nice. I was determined once again.

“–Let’s all live and go back together.”

The two of them nodded firmly at my words.

“So did you figure out a way, Naoto?”

“Yes. We will follow the established method of disabling the detonator.”

“You can’t mean relying on luck?”

“No. I really don’t think even God would be so kind as to give us ten in a row.”

Touko-san’s words had contained a hint.

“If we make use of Touko-san’s ‘Precognition’, we can choose the leads we should cut.”

“That’s impossible. My ability looks ten minutes into the future, remember?”

Touko-san was perplexed.

“We can’t count on my Persona now that there’s less than ten minutes before the explosion. I don’t want to upset you, but I’ve been trying to look into the future for a while, and every time I don’t see anything… I can’t do anything at such a crucial time.

This is the worst…”

Wordlessly, I moved behind Touko-san. “–Give me power, Amatsu-Mikaboshi.” I called forth my own Persona.

“It’s all right. Don’t worry. We can surely change the future. Even if it’s a future you couldn’t change alone, Touko-san–”

In the next moment, I strongly squeezed Touko-san’s drenched shoulders.

“–If we join hands, we can surely change it. No, not change. We will decide our future with our own power.”

I sent a glance at Sousei-san.

“Sousei-san, come here! With your strength, we should be able to sever the leads even without the right tools. Please sever the ones Touko-san indicates.”

“…Eh? Me? But I don’t see anything.”

“Are you forgetting my Persona’s ability?”

"...Huh? Naoto, isn't your ability 'powering up other people's Personas'?"

"Naoto's ability would be helpful if we wanted to see far into the future. But right now there's no point in powering up my 'Precognition' and seeing more than ten minutes into the future."

I faced the two of them and shook my head.

"You're both mistaken. Please remember my ability. Amatsu-Mikaboshi's ability is 'Ability Tune'. It is not the power to 'strengthen' others' Personas, but to 'tune' them."

It was slightly strange to see the expressions of sudden realization spring up on both their faces.

"That's right. Tuning can strengthen someone's power – but it can also weaken it."

"...I see. You'll weaken the power of my 'Precognition' so I see the near future. Then we'll sever the right leads?"

"Yes." I nodded.

“Good job, Naoto. You figured all this out.”

“In any case, there’s no time. Now it’s a race against time.”

The numbers on the digital display read [02:35]. That was roughly 150 seconds. We were cutting ten leads, so that was about fifteen seconds per lead.

The real work began here.

I used my “Ability Tune” and tuned Touko-san’s “Precognition” from “ten minutes into the future” to “ten seconds into the future”.

Would Touko-san be able to see if the decision was right or wrong “ten seconds into the future”? If she could, that meant Touko-san existed in that future. In other words, the bomb had not exploded.

Sousei-san was the one who selected the leads. He would grip the lead he planned to sever, and if Touko-san gave the go ahead, he would act accordingly and actually sever the lead. If we succeeded at that ten times, our mission would be

complete.

In the shortest scenario, we would first deduce which wire we should leave for last; conversely, the longest would be if it did not become clear which wire should be last until there were only two remaining.

For us, using our all power to reel in the futures, luck could not be completed excluded as a factor. I felt as if I was only now becoming aware of the vast concepts of life and fate.

There was another problem. What made me most uneasy was the stamina necessary to maintain our Personas.

It was necessary that Touko-san and I continually utilize our Personas while we disabled the time bomb's detonator. To be honest, I had pushed myself too far before coming to the roof. Touko-san had been exposed to the rain for a long time and was completely chilled. Naturally, our physical stamina had been quite drained.

Nevertheless, this was a life or death situation. We would not be complaining. I steeled my expression with a conscious effort and prayed as I kept a close eye on other two's exchange.

"White!"

"...Okay."

"Black!"

"...That one's okay too."

We hadn't found it yet. There was still not much to worry about. Even if it came down to my hypothetical longest pattern, we would be cutting it close, but we would succeed in disabling the detonator. Yellow, pink, navy, and brown were not hits either, but the disarmament was proceeding smoothly.

–On the seventh lead.

"Green!" Even when Sousei-san shouted, there was no reply from Touko-san.

"A-Are you all right!?"

I had a bad feeling, and when I peered over Touko-san's shoulder, her face was pale. She had one hand on her forehead and was taking ragged breaths.

"...Sorry. I'm fine. Just a little dizzy..."

As Touko-san continued taking deep breaths, she weakly raised one hand to me. No matter how I looked at her, she did not seem fine. But I was not one to talk. In truth, my consciousness was also beginning to grow dim.

"...Just a bit more. Do your best."

It was frustrating that I could do no more than offer words of encouragement.

"...S-Sousei. Green is fine."

Touko-san said painfully, just as if she were forcibly emptying the contents of her stomach. Though it could not be helped, after that our pace slowed substantially.

Next we somehow managed to clear gray and red. Unfortunately, we still had not found a hit. In other

words, we seemed to be approaching the longest pattern. I did not want to admit it, but the situation had now changed, and I much loathed our misfortune.

And then, in an unforeseen development, when only two remained, blue and purple – Touko-san finally used up the last of her strength.

I thought she was swaying back and forth like a pendulum, and then she fell back against me. Touko-san's breath was faint as she leaned against my chest. Of course, Kushinada-Hime vanished.

"...I-I'm sorry."

When Touko-san wrung out her words, that was perhaps the last ounce of her strength. Then she lost consciousness.

"Naoto! What do we do!? Just one more! Which one!? Which one do I cut!?"

Sousei-san urgently raised his voice, glaring at the leads. I sent a glance at the bomb's digital display.

[00:30]

Only a little time remaining. There were two alternatives: blue and purple. The chances were one in two. Cruelly, if we made the wrong decision after coming this far, it would be the end of the line. In addition, if the countdown reached zero as we hesitated over the decision, it would be the end of the line. Right now, our luck had run dry.

[00:25]

I was tortured by impatience. My rational thinking had been mercilessly stolen away. My logic was not proceeding, as if I could not concentrate due to my physical exhaustion. However, time was passing whether I liked it or not.

“Naoto! Tell me! Which one!?”

I couldn’t think of anything. Even though I knew nothing would change just by standing and waiting.

–If everything was to end here, should we just leave the final lead to chance…?

[00:20]

Twenty seconds left. Sousei-san yelled. That yell strongly pierced my heart.

“Naoto! Naoto Shirogane! Detective! Naoto Shirogane! Let me hear your logic!”

–Yes, that’s right. I was a detective. I was Detective Naoto Shirogane. It was absolute nonsense for a detective like myself to choose to leave everything to chance as my final method. Detectives were supposed to believe in logical conclusions based on the accumulation of facts and deductive reasoning.

[00:15]

My thoughts whirled rapidly. I stared at Touko-san, who lay in my arms, eyes closed. Suddenly, my gaze was arrested by a “certain part” of Touko-san.

“…I see.”

Touko-san had indeed said that the trap leads had been freely chosen by the one who set the bomb. Who was it that had set it? Touko-san had not stated

who had taken this bomb from the station and set it in these apartments, but shouldn't it have been Kyouhei Hioka?

When I deduced that, the answer naturally came to me.

[00:05]

"Sousei-san! Leave behind the color I am about to tell you!"

I yelled the name of the color with all my strength. When he heard my answer, Sousei-san wore a surprised expression for only a moment.

However, he immediately cried, "Leave it to me!" He grasped the end of the lead with both hands, and with a loud yell of "This'll end it!", Sousei-san tore it off in one movement. I caught my breath and stared at the bomb's digital display.

[00:01]

In that moment, the numbers on the bomb's digital display halted completely. I waited breathlessly for

a few seconds, unsure if the bomb would actually explode.

After several seconds had passed, I finally realized that we had really succeeded in disabling the bomb. I expelled all the air from my lungs and collapsed on my back on the wet floor, still clutching Touko-san to my chest.

The cold of the concrete really felt good. The sky spread out before my eyes and blue peeked out between gaps in the clouds.

The blue of the sky as it cleared that felt as if it would hurt my eyes, the smell of the damp concrete that tickled my nostrils, and the gentle wind that caressed my flushed cheeks told me I was still alive.

April 11 Near Iwato Apartments

The area around Iwato Apartments was surrounded by police vehicles and wrapped in a heavy atmosphere. Touko-san had regained consciousness and informed her police department. “I am Kagu-tsuchi.”

Sousei-san and I exchanged words with Touko-san for a while before the police came. But we did not say much.

"...You two might get mad at me again, but I'm wondering if it's really okay for me to be alive. Shouldn't I have died? I'm still worrying about it."

Touko-san murmured as she gazed at the scud clouds drifting across the sky.

She had murdered several people with her own hands. There were extenuating circumstances to consider, but they were not actions that would be forgiven. It was ironic: we had saved her life like this, but it was not impossible that she would fall under the executioner's axe.

"...I believe you can atone for those sins exactly because you are alive. I apologize for the trite opinion."

I could not think of any tactful words.

"...Just don't forget this. You have us, Touko-san. We

will await your return."

And so I offered my own feelings.

"Yeah! I'll be waiting for you to come back too, Touko. 'Cause I'm a robot! Even if it's ten or twenty years from now! Or if it's a hundred years, I'll wait as long as you want, you know?"

Sousei-san smiled roguishly.

"Er, I'm human, so I would appreciate it if you would come back a bit sooner if you are able. When that time comes, I will work diligently to make the most delicious 'lukewarm coffee' for you."

Touko-san laughed happily at our words. "...Thanks. I'll look forward to it." She squeezed her eyes shut tightly. Her expression, brimming with a smile, looked as if she were reflecting on the joys of being alive.

Touko-san was handcuffed, and just before she was to enter the police cruiser, I called out, "Please wait." I had remembered something I had forgotten to tell

her.

“Touko-san, do you know? What kind of pendant that is?”

“…What kind? I was born in February, so it’s my birthstone, an amethyst ‘pendulum’, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

It was a so-called “pendulum pendant,” where the pendant on the chain was sharp and resembled a pendulum. I also knew of one other name for it.

“It’s also called a ‘dowsing pendulum’.”

Dowsing was a technique invented to find underground veins of precious metals by using a pendulum or stick.

“…In the end, this is nothing more than my hypothesis, but Kyouhei Hioka may have given you that pendant hoping that it would ‘guide you if you ever lost your way’.”

Touko-san shut her eyes tightly and wrapped both hands around her pendant.

“And one more thing. Why amethyst? It’s not just because it’s the February birthstone, but I believe it was also filled with Kyouhei Hioka’s feelings of wanting to be with you always. That is because–”

After she heard my reason, a single tear shone on Touko-san’s cheek. “What was Kyouhei thinking? Geez, that idiot. He’s always been so full of himself…”

It was just as if that tear – was a beautiful jewel, like the amethyst of the pendant.

Final Chapter: Future

Just as we were seeing off the police cruiser carrying Touko-san, Sousei-san said without a trace of timidity, “Oh, I forgot.”

When I asked, he had forgotten that he had left Tohru Momochi, known as Futodama, in a clump of bushes. That was bad, of course, and so we hurried toward the overgrown bushes, removed from the grounds of Iwato Apartments.

Tohru Momochi, known as Futodama, was still blindfolded, gagged, and tied hand and foot, but he had regained consciousness, and when we came running, he was rolling across the gravel on the ground, groaning.

We freed Futodama from his restraints, and he spoke in a childish voice matching his age. “D-Don’t think you’ll get away with this!” The first words out of his mouth were quite abusive.

“My papa and mama are executives of a foreign

company! They're really important! That awful woman! I'll ask them to make sure she gets the death penalty!"

He was yelling hysterically, but Futodama's shrill voice, which had not yet broken, only sounded to me like that of a child throwing a tantrum and asking to be bought a toy.

"Bastard! Where's our thank you for saving you?"

Sousei-san stormed closer to Futodama, barely restraining himself from striking him.

"Sousei-san! Calm down!"

Flustered, I spread both arms and forced my way between them.

It was not entirely for Futodama's sake. Rather, it was somewhat for Touko-san's sake, but it was a fact that we had risked our lives to protect the boy. In particular, Sousei-san's body had been damaged saving the boy, but he received only abuse in return. It was not unreasonable for him to become enraged.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about! Why should I thank you? Aren’t you police? It’s the police’s job to protect regular people! I didn’t do anything wrong but something really dangerous happened to me! That’s negligence! I should be saying you’re useless! I’m gonna write all about how the police messed up and bash you on the Internet!”

Even though Futodama appeared scared, some of his confidence leaked through in his tone.

“If you’re my enemy on the Internet! No one can stand up to me, not even the police or politicians!”

He took pride in his influence on the Internet. His gaze was rude and scornful of others and his eyes corrupt. His smile was so vulgar I could not think of it as that of a child.

“Huh? You’re saying you didn’t do anything wrong!? Bastard! Are you serious!? A lot of people died ‘cause of you ‘Five Togakushi Judges’!”

“T-That’s not true! It’s not my fault! All I did was post on the Internet! It’s not like I really shot or

stabbed them!”

“I can’t take this anymore! If you don’t get what’s coming out of my mouth, then I’ll have to teach you with my fists!”

“Wait, Sousei-san!”

“Move! Don’t stop me, Naoto! This brat won’t get it unless he suffers from it!”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I think so too.”

“…Huh?”

Sousei-san raised his voice in confusion and stopped moving, as if he had not expected me to agree.

In the next moment, a dry sound resounded up into the blue sky. Just then, I had struck the boy with my open palm.

"...Huh?"

The boy drew back, wearing an expression that said he did not understand why he had been hit.

"It hurt, doesn't it? It hurt when I hit you? That is 'pain'."

I grasped the boy's shoulders and stared into his eyes.

"Even if it is not with violence, but with words. Even if those words are on the Internet. If they experience something painful, anyone would be hurt. If the people targeted by your words feel pain, there is no difference between their bodies or their hearts."

Without exception. People hurt others without knowing. There did not exist a single person who had not hurt another in their whole life, from when they were born until now. Unless they had no contact with others, people could not live without hurting other people.

In that case, at the very least, one should at least

carry in their heart the pain of having hurt another. And then they should work toward the ideal of never wanting to hurt anyone again, even if it was impossible. That was the eternal struggle imposed upon us humans.

"...Don't forget the pain in your cheek that you're feeling now. You must not forget that the slander you carelessly posted hurt someone who really exists, somewhere on the other side of the screen."

That was all I told him, and then I stood up. "...Let's go." Accompanied by Sousei-san, I left behind Futodama and departed that place.

The boy behind me clutched his cheek where he had been struck, still dumbfounded.

"That surprised me! I didn't think you'd raise a hand against that brat, Naoto!"

After we entrusted Futodama's care to a nearby policeman, Sousei-san slapped me heartily on the shoulder. It hurt.

“…Was it that unexpected?”

“Guess it was, now that you mention it. I got a better opinion of you now. It’s gonna be good for that brat. And I’m in a better mood too! Serves him right!”

“…That’s right. I did think I did it for his sake. I don’t know how well he’ll take the lesson to heart. However, if he remembers even a little of today’s pain, it was worth playing the villain.”

I smiled at Sousei-san.

“And also, wouldn’t it be easier on him, having a woman like me hit him rather than you, Sousei-san?”

“Hmph! You’re too soft!”

Sousei-san raised his voice and laughed. Then after laughing for a while, he asked me.

“By the way, why did you tell me to leave ‘purple’ back then on the roof?”

When I looked up at him standing beside me, Sousei-san was rubbing his chin with his fingertips

as if in puzzlement.

“With my simple thinking, the two left, blue and purple, are usually called ‘ao’ and ‘murasaki’, right? And ‘ao’ means something else. That ‘ao’ is like Touko. She’s Touko Aoi, right? So I felt like cutting the blue one was wrong. But in the end, your judgment was right, Naoto. Why’s that?”

[poor localization effectiveness ahoy. when they were talking about the wires, they always used katakana to write out the English words, so phonetically “blue” and “purple”. Sousei brings up the Japanese equivalent terms, “ao” (blue) and “murasaki” (purple). then he mentions that the blue “ao” (青) can be written another way (蒼). that “ao” is the one used in Touko’s surname, Aoi (蒼井).]

“…To tell the truth, I was also worried about that just before. I believed Kyouhei Hioka was the one who set the bomb. He must have been the one who set up the dummy wires. Kyouhei Hioka loved Touko-san, so it was hard to believe that he would

set the bomb so that it couldn't be disabled without cutting the blue that reminded him of her."

"Right?"

"But just before the time limit, my eye was caught by the pendant Touko-san wears around her neck. That was what convinced me. By the way, Sousei-san, do you remember what color Touko-san's pendant is?"

"...Ah, right! It's purple!"

Sousei-san hit his palm with his fist. "I get it!" Amethyst was the February birthstone. And needless to say, amethysts were purple.

"...No, but. Isn't that not really a good reason? It's not a solid reason just 'cause the pendant's purple. Back then, don't you think I would've hesitated to cut the wire if you told me your logic?"

Without thinking, I smiled bitterly. It was true that even I would have hesitated if that was my only reason.

“Then I have a question for you. What color do you get if you mix red and blue?”

“Huh? It’s definitely purple, right? Even kids know that stuff.”

“That’s right. Purple. And just as you said before, Sousei-san, purple is commonly known as ‘murasaki’. In other words, ‘murasaki’ is the color you get from mixing ‘ao’ and ‘aka’. And ‘ao’ is also written as the ‘ao’ in Aoi. In addition, ‘aka’ is – also written as ‘hiiro’. You understand now, don’t you–”

“–Purple is the color you get when you combine Touko Aoi’s blue and Kyouhei Hioka’s red.”

[more color play. “aka” (赤) means “red”, also written as “hiiro” (緋色), which is a scarlet shade. Broken down, the first kanji is read “aka” or “hi”, and the second is simply “iro”, meaning “color”. “Hioka” (緋丘) is written using that same “hi”.]

“The color purple was an embodiment of Kyouhei Hioka’s feelings of wanting to be together always. There was no way he would sever their color.”

Sousei-san nodded seriously. “…So that’s it.”

“…Sousei-san. Thank you for trusting me back then.”

I faced Sousei-san and bowed my head.

“You asked me to confirm my reasoning, but at the crucial moment on the roof, you inwardly questioned whether we should really leave purple. Even so, you followed my directions.”

It was the critical moment of a life-or-death situation. Trusting someone in extreme circumstances and acting without hesitation was easier said than done. Moreover, the one he was placing his trust in was me, who had previously betrayed him.

When I spoke, Sousei-san faced me. “Yeah, well, ‘course I would.” He snorted with laughter. And then he spoke strongly.

“Because it’s important to have a trusting relationship with your partner!”

"...I see."

Needless to say, I laughed.

"...Them too, it would've been better if they got into a fight or something at least once."

Suddenly, Sousei-san wore a serious expression and looked up at the sky as if dazzled.

"I agree with Kyouhei Hioka. If one of my family members died for a stupid reason, I couldn't stay calm. He knew the reason his sister Kaoru died, and when he saw the 'Five Togakushi Judges' who caused it living happily, he thought he wanted to kill them himself. So in the beginning, I was really cheering on Kyouhei Hioka."

That was when I finally understood. Sousei-san had supported Kyouhei Hioka because he held strong feelings for Yuuri-san and his sister Ai-chan.

"But you know, revenge only leaves you feeling empty. If Kyouhei Hioka succeeded in getting his revenge against those 'Five Togakushi Judges', and if

he thought about what was left for him after that, it would the same choice Touko made. In the end, he would've become a demon of revenge and he'd get rid of himself, right? When it was over, there would only be unhappiness left. Especially for the people left behind."

Sousei-san's shoulders sagged heavily, and, sympathizing, I shivered.

It was frightening to imagine. If things had not gone well and we had lost Touko-san, it would have been difficult for me to continue on as a detective.

"But what happened was Kyouhei Hioka failed at becoming a demon and messed up his revenge. So a new demon, Touko, was born, and summoned a different kind of unhappiness. It's a downward spiral: unhappiness just leads to more unhappiness. What went wrong? The Kyouhei siblings and Touko all cared about each other, right? They didn't wanna cause trouble for each other and they accepted each other, right? So then why did this kind of disaster

happen?"

Sousei-san looked down at me. However, all I could do was meet his gaze without giving any response. That was because I saw the loneliness in his eyes and felt that he already had the answer.

"When I thought about it, I got it. Them too, it would've been better if they got into a fight or something at least once. If they fought, or got embarrassed, or hurt each other. If you really care about the person, sometimes there are things you have to talk about."

"There may be some truth to that..."

There were times when one came to mutually understand another through repeated arguments. I would not reveal the identities of those people.

"So what's important! It's not what all those random people in society and on the Internet have to say! What's most important is the moving words of the people near you who care about you!"

Sousei-san strongly sought my agreement. “Isn’t that right? Naoto!”

“That’s right.” I wholeheartedly gave my agreement.

“…If they’d all been a bit more honest, telling each other ‘Trust me’ or ‘I’m with you’, maybe it would’ve turned out different…”

“Yes. I think that surely would have been the case,” I agreed again.

If we had met the living Hioka siblings, would we have been able to save them, the same as we had Touko-san? Though I knew it was unavoidable, though I thought it was impertinent, I was full of disappointment.

Intending to expel those ill thoughts, I took a deep breath and diverted my mood.

“Let’s go back, Sousei-san. Tsuge-san is probably waiting for our report at the station.”

Because there were people who were waiting for us

to return alive.

“So why don’t you hurry up and turn into my bike?”

“Who? Whose bike!? Since when has someone as great as me belonged to you? I’m not your servant!”

Though he spoke rudely, Sousei-san obediently changed into a bike. I already knew he was really quite softhearted.

Tsuge-san and Touko-san had both said we made a “good team”. I personally did not feel that way. However, there were not many people like Sousei-san, who did not hesitate to speak his mind.

He was an important person to me . I thought so once again as I gazed at the red streamlined body.

Our heights, appearances, and personalities were completely different, and just as our names indicated, we were exact opposites.

Right – white and black.

I did not understand it. When we first met, I had not thought it was at all possible that I would get along

well with Sousei-san, who was arrogant and vigorous, but now that it was over, facets of Sousei-san's personality not present in my own had been absolutely essential to the resolution of this case.

If it hadn't been for him, we definitely would not have been able to save Touko-san. With that in mind, words of gratitude naturally flowed from me. "I'm glad you're my partner…" Though of course, I was too embarrassed to say it to his face, so I limited myself to muttering softly so that he wouldn't hear.

And there were others I could not forget to thank.

I gazed absently across the scarlet streets as we passed. I held my gratitude toward my faraway friends within my heart as the gentle but slightly cold wind brushed against my cheeks.

If there was one difference between Touko-san and me, it was that I wasn't lonely. At the same time, it was a difference from my former self, who desperately strove alone as a detective.

In a faraway, unfamiliar city, I was inundated with

many first meetings with people, experienced hopeless difficulties and vast differences in power, and yet I had fought until the end without giving up, because my precious friends were always within my heart.

I did not want to look bad in front of them. I wanted to see them again. No matter what anyone else thought of me, they would believe in me no matter what. Those thoughts gave me strength.

I would talk about this case with everyone when I returned to that town. And then I would share with them the thoughts and feelings I had during this case. And then I would talk about the wonderful people I met in this city.

"...Ah, right, Naoto."

Sousei-san's voice came from the bike.

"You know, Ai won't shut up about inviting you to Gramps's house. She says she wants to get to know you. And, well, the case is solved, so how 'bout tonight? Ah, well, you know, it's no big deal if you

can't..."

"No, I'll gladly pay a visit."

There was no reason for me to decline. There was Ai-chan, of course, but I also wanted to hear about Sousei-san's everyday life.

"You really care about Ai-chan, don't you, Sousei-san?"

My expression relaxed and I smiled. He gave off the impression of being a good older brother who would do anything for his sister.

"Huh? No way!" When I spoke, Sousei-san objected immediately.

"Ai's damn loud and annoying! She doesn't listen to me and won't shut up no matter how long I wait! I've gotta be the grown-up and take care of her!"

Well then, it seemed Ai-chan was very important to him. Sousei-san was quite arrogant, but she made him think he had to act the adult. I would have to make a stealthy inquiry as to her methods.

“Ah! Talking about Ai made me remember! She told me to go buy the new Tatsumi brand stuffed animal! We’re going to Junes for a bit!”

Saying that, Sousei-san pulled off his specialty, drifting in a showy manner into the lane going in the opposite direction. As usual, his driving was not gentle on his passenger, but I said nothing, in deference to his role as a “doting older brother”.

“–Hey, Sousei-san.”

There was one thing bothering me, and so I spoke up while we were waiting at a traffic signal.

“If you’d like, I’ll go with you to the laboratory where you were born.”

The laboratory itself had been involved in an explosion and perhaps there was nothing left of it. However, it still contained many memories. Memories of someone irreplaceable to Sousei-san.

“…How do you know about that?”

Perhaps due to his great surprise, Sousei-san did not

move when the traffic signal turned green, even when the horns of the cars behind us began to blare.

"...Ah, right. Gramps, huh. Damn! Bastard can't keep his mouth shut!"

Touko-san had said it on the roof of Iwato Apartments.

"The Persona abilities you two received are a result of what you strongly wished for in your hearts, right?"

Extrapolating from that, it was clear why Sousei-san had awakened, not to the combative-type Persona they had originally aimed for, but to one with the "the power to hear the voices left behind by the dead".

Wasn't it because he wanted to experience the warmth of his mother once more–?

"...Stupid. I don't like this. Stop worrying about weird things. You were practically falling over before. Just take it easy for today."

Sousei-san bluntly ordered, and the bike began to

accelerate from a stop.

“...Understood.”

Upon further reflection, perhaps I had said too much.

“...But you know.”

Sousei-san quietly muttered after the bike had been running for a while.

“...If I feel like it... When I grow up enough that I’m okay with digging up memories of Yuuri... Can I count on you for support?”

I laughed a little and immediately answered.

“A foolish question. Have you forgotten?”

I softly rested my hand on his red body and cried out to the deep red sky.

“We are partners!”

I would grow even stronger.

That was because I knew humans could become stronger just by having several people precious to

them.

Afterword

Looking back now that it's over, I realized this incident is a "crossroads of life". For me, it was surely a "crossroads of life" when I received the request for this work from the chief editor.

The story I received was a "Persona x Dengeki Bunko" collaborative project with seriously high, 120% expectations. It came as an unreasonable, big surprise that really thrilled me, as an author fresh off his debut.

Even so, the reason I took on this project is because I really love "Persona 4". I was also convinced it would be an irreplaceable experience for me.

To tell the truth, the days since I took on this work were a series of discoveries. Game and novel. There were new, refreshing approaches to production, and everything was a learning experience. I feel like I learned much while working with everyone in the Persona team and was able to mature as an author.

Katsura Hashino-san, who pointed me in the right direction when I was lost; Yuuichirou Tanaka-san, who gave me detailed advice on the setting; Shigenori Soejima-san, who drew wonderful designs; Shuuji Sogabe-san, who provided lively illustrations; and everyone else at Index. Also Eguchi-san and Honda-san of ASCII Media Works. Dengeki Bunko's Oyama-san and the chief editor Kumeta-san and all the people who helped with this work. I am truly grateful.

When I think about it, I was supported by such distinguished people. My heart is deeply moved. I'm very happy. I'm really glad I became an author.

It doesn't seem like I'll easily repay my debt to everyone. Please give me some time. Looking back now, I think I dedicated myself as the author Natsuki Mamiya so that I would be worthy of your help.

I've left the most important thing for last.

This completed work, "Persona x Detective Naoto",

exists for you readers more than anyone. If you enjoyed it even just a little, there could be no greater honor.

I look forward to the day we meet again. This has been Natsuki Mamiya.

宮は幸せ者でございます。作家になって本当によかった。

皆さんへの恩は簡単には返せそうにもありません。時間をください。あとになって振り返った時、間宮夏生という作家があるのは皆さんのお陰であると言えるように精進いたします。

最後に最も大事なことを。

こうして完成した『ペルソナ×探偵ＮＡＯＴＯ』は誰でもない読者の皆さんのためにあります。少しでも楽しんで頂けたのならば作者にとってこれに勝る喜びはありません。

またお会いできる日を楽しみに。間宮夏生でした。

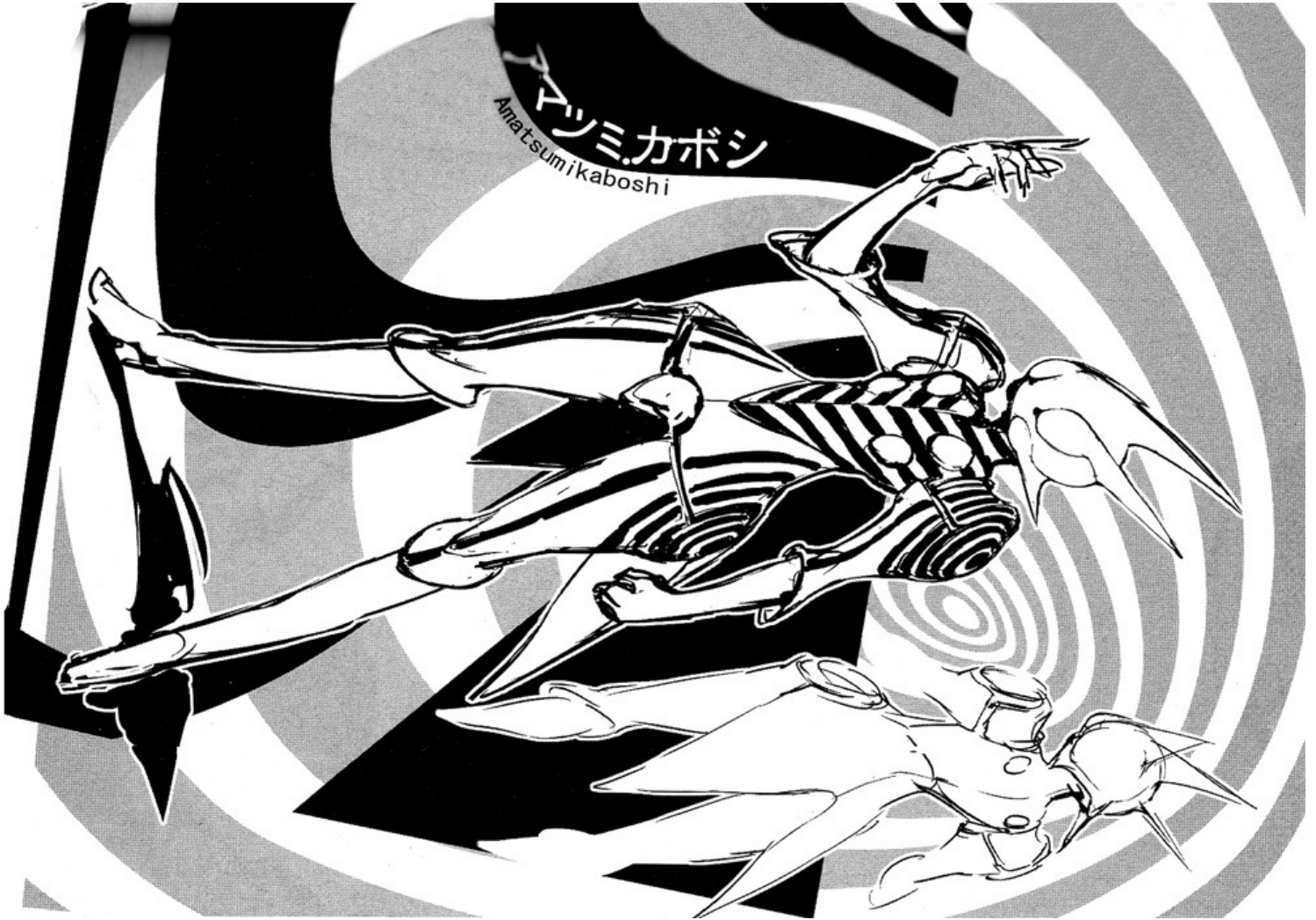
Character & Persona Concept Art

ペルソナ×探偵

MAOTO

Character & Persona 設定画

17歳。代々探偵を輩出してきた白鐘一族の5代目。一昨年に起きた稲羽市の
連続殺人事件でテレビに出演して以降、端正な容姿と高校生で探偵という珍しさから
「探偵王子」の愛称で知られるように。実は少年ならぬ「少女探偵」だが、
仕事がら軽視されぬよう、男子のような装いが常である。
今作で新たに、ペルソナ「アマツミカボシ」を覚醒する。


アマツミカボシ
Amatsumikaboshi

Seventeen years old. The fifth generation of the Shirogane lineage of detectives. Due to her handsome face and the rarity of being a high school detective, she became known by the nickname “Detective Prince”, after appearing on television during the serial murder case that occurred in Inaba one year ago. In truth, she is not a boy, but a “girl detective”; however, she normally acts masculine to avoid being belittled in the course of her work.

In this story, she awakens to a new Persona, “Amatsu-Mikaboshi”.

大企業「桐条グループ」に製造されたロボット。正式呼称は「対シャドウ特別制圧兵装R零式・ジェネシス」。名の通り、本来は人外の存在（シャドウ）との戦いを意図された機体。機能停止した前世代機「七式」の役割を継がせるべく極秘裏に開発されたが、性能の欠落から採用は見送りに。しかし、管理者の事故死や2009年に起きたグループ当主急逝などの混乱から凍結を免れ、図らずも最後発機ながら稼働時間が過去最長の機体となる。そのため会話は非常に流暢。ペルソナ「ツクヨミ」のもつ特異な力は彼の哀しい過去に由来している。

黒神創世
Sousei Kurogami

A robot produced by the corporate entity the Kirijo Group. His official designation is “Specialized Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapon R-00 Genesis”. As his name says, he was originally constructed to combat non-human beings (Shadows). Before being removed from service, he was developed in absolute secrecy as the succeeding “seventh generation” machine, but due to the deficiencies in his performance, he was never utilized. However, he evaded being decommissioned in the disorder following the accidental death of his supervisor, as well as the sudden death in 2009 of the head of the group. He unexpectedly became the last of the series and his operation time rivals that of the oldest machines. For that reason, his conversational skills are surprisingly fluid.

The unique power of his “Tsukuyomi” is derived from his sorrowful past.